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JOHN MARK
FIRST GOSPEL WRITER

HEROES OF GOD SERIES

John Mark
First Gospel Writer

by

ALBERT N. WILLIAMS

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JOHN MARK, FIRST GOSPEL WRITER

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Toni May

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1. STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE

THE WIDOW Miriam looked deep into the eyes of her sturdy, thirteen-year-old son.

The boy John Mark stood straight and erect. With them in the richly furnished master room of their Jerusalem mansion were Mordecai, his mother's brother, and Basilleus, the Greek overseer who had come with them from the island of Cyprus. Basilleus had helped them make their home in Jerusalem a year ago after the death of John Mark's father, one of the wealthiest Jewish traders in the Roman Empire.

Basilleus was much more than overseer of the estate the father had left. He was trusted servant and business agent for the widow Miriam, and he was tutor and personal friend to the young John Mark.

The boy heard a slight rustle of linen garments as his Uncle Mordecai moved a step or two to face him. At the same time he felt the comforting strength of Basilleus' hand upon his shoulder. John Mark had taken no part in the conversation, but had been an intent listener. Now he wet his lips to speak, "Yes, my uncle," he said, feeling for the first time in his life that he was no longer a boy but a man, "I am old enough to know what it means to keep a secret."

For a long moment his aged uncle, thin as a reed

but strong as steel wire, studied him, and then, with a smile, he spoke to Basilleus: "You really think the boy is old enough to keep a quiet tongue in his head about this matter?"

Basilleus replied without a moment's hesitation: "John Mark can be trusted. I have taught him the virtue of the Greeks and the courage of the Romans, to match his lessons in Jewish righteousness and piety. He can be trusted."

Mordecai's eyes gleamed like soft coals beneath his bushy eyebrows as he watched Basilleus. John Mark had often noticed that his uncle, who had lived all of his life in Jerusalem, was never completely at ease with Basilleus, a Gentile, though he was a freeman—an outsider to the close, tight world of the aristocratic Hebrews.

At last Mordecai shrugged his shoulders slightly and sat down on the stone bench below the window. With a mere flip of his wrist he motioned John Mark and Basilleus to sit beside him.

"We'll all have to keep a quiet tongue in our heads," he announced in a matter-of-fact voice, "or we'll all feel the tip of a lash on our shoulders."

Basilleus looked steadily at the older man and nodded his head in agreement, though John Mark was still completely in the dark about the need for secrecy, or, in fact, even why his mother and uncle had called him from his studies for this strange conversation.

"It's these Galileans whom your mother has promised to lend a room to," Mordecai told them at last. "They've been staying in Bethany, and they need a room in a house here in Jerusalem to celebrate the

Passover feast in the proper tradition. Your mother has agreed to let them use the upper room in this house—the room that has its own stairway to the alley behind the house.”

“The Galileans,” mused Basilleus softly. “There was a disturbance in the Temple yesterday on their account. Their leader, this Jesus from Nazareth in the province of Galilee, overturned the money-changers’ tables and drove them out of their booths with his staff.”

“As well he might,” sniffed Mordecai. “Still we can’t risk any trouble here in the city on his account.”

And then suddenly, as if struck with a strange idea, he peered at Basilleus. “Hmmm,” he ventured, “and how is it you know so much about this man and these matters?”

The Greek overseer smiled politely. “He has been in the city these past few days, and I had business to transact in the Court of Gentiles in the Temple. I have heard him preach twice. And yesterday I heard about the disturbance.”

“Then you’ve seen him?” enquired Mordecai.

“I’ve seen him,” replied Basilleus. “And I’ve wondered about him.”

“You’ve wondered about him? Why should you wonder about him? You’re not a Jew.”

The Greek smiled. “I have heard whispers that he might be the one known as the *Meshiach*, as you call it, or, in our softer Greek tongue, as the *Messias*. He would be the Anointed One, or, in Greek, the *Christos*, come to rule over all mankind.”

“But,” Mordecai spluttered, “our *Meshiach* would

only rule over the Congregation of Israel, the Jews. Why should you, a Greek, be interested?"

"Simply for this reason, honored sir. I have also heard it said among the Jews that this *Meshiach* would bring a light unto the Gentiles. Is that not so?"

Mordecai nodded slowly.

"Then," continued Basilleus, "any man, Jew or Gentile, Persian or Greek, should be interested in a man who comes with this Anointing—whether he be Mithra, the son of Ahura-mazda, the Persian God of Light, as they tell it in the east; or whether he come as the Jewish *Meshiach*; or as the Unknown God of the Greeks."

"I . . . I don't understand." Mordecai shook his head slowly. "I don't understand why a Greek would even be interested in the coming of the Jewish *Meshiach*, any more than the Persians would be interested in the Unknown God of the Greeks."

Basilleus smiled and answered him softly: "Because, good Mordecai, the Greeks and the Persians, as well as the Jews, might be speaking of the same divine event."

This was a notion far beyond old Mordecai's grasp. For centuries the Jews, descendants of the Hebrew patriarchs, had shut themselves off from the world and had tried through every means to keep themselves isolated and separate. But even the most isolated and provincial Jew among the residents of the Holy City realized vaguely that the Greeks and the Romans tried through every means to mix the peoples of the world together to form one large nation.

As far as the Greeks were concerned, their language, their culture, their art, and their literature had been

as common as copper coins in every city of the wide world for two hundred years. Where they left off, the Romans had taken up. The whole world of the west was even now one huge nation, the Roman Empire.

But Mordecai could not understand it. Nor could any Jew.

Basilleus did not try to carry the discussion any farther down these paths that were proving so strange to the puzzled old Jerusalemite. Smiling gently, he rose to his feet and asked: "Well and good, master. What are we to do?"

Relief at being brought back to the commonplace things that he did understand showed in Mordecai's face as he told them: "All the other servants are gone for the day at my orders. Basilleus will see to the wants of the little company of Galileans when they arrive to prepare and eat the Passover feast."

He turned to his nephew. "And you, John Mark, you shall have the duty of guarding the outer stair."

The boy nodded his head. "No one is to come up the stairs while they are there?"

"No one," replied the uncle. "No one must know that the Galileans are celebrating the Passover in this house."

2. FLIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

AS HE WENT ABOUT THE SECRET TASK that his uncle had assigned him, urgent questions burned in John Mark's mind. Who were these Galileans? What was their mission in Jerusalem? Who was the Messiah?

Readily would the Greek, Basilleus, have answered his young master to the best of his great ability, but time would not permit. From the moment that Mordecai gave them their orders and pressed secrecy upon them, the day was filled with strange activity.

First, John Mark had been sent to guide the Galileans to the great house. He had been given a water jug to carry on his shoulder, but he was not told to fetch water. Instead, he was told only to stand near the Water Gate and await a sign—and then, without a word, to lead some strangers back through the teeming city.

He had done that. For the better part of an hour he had stood amidst the hurrying crowds that jostled through the Water Gate, and finally, just as he was on the verge of giving up hope that anything would happen, two strange men stood beside him. They looked at him and nodded. That was all. They were powerfully built men, wearing peasants' clothes and bearing the deep tan of the out-of-doors on their faces.

Not a word did they say to him, but one of them turned to the other, and when he spoke, John Mark could recognize the sharp accents of the province of Galilee. "Ah, Simon," the first one said, "this must be our messenger."

John Mark did as Basilleus had bidden him. Without a backward glance he turned and made his way through the city to his mother's house. Silently, like white shadows in the throng, the two Galileans followed.

But if he expected to take part in a dangerous secret meeting on the upper floor of his house, he was greatly mistaken. When he arrived, with the Galileans trailing behind, he found only Basilleus hard at work cleaning the room. And shortly he, too, was put to work—washing lentils, cleaning the stalks of the bitter herbs, and performing other kitchen tasks such as he had often seen the kitchen servants do for any large company of guests.

During all this long day, he and Basilleus and the two Galileans, whose names he soon discovered were Simon and John, worked in silence. Indeed, the drudgery of the task and the sobering silence would have bored and tired him to distraction had it not been for the fact that they were awaiting the leader of these Galileans—the man from Nazareth, who had brazened down the priests in the Temple, and whom many, so Basilleus had told him, thought was a marvelous new prophet sent by God. Even, perhaps, the Messiah!

But when, at last, the other members of the party did arrive, it was a moment of sharp disappointment for John Mark. These were not men with the wild fires

of prophecy in their eyes. Like Simon and John, they seemed to be no more than honest fishermen from the province of Galilee.

As for their leader, Jesus from the town of Nazareth—save only for the strength in his face, John Mark would not have recognized him as outstanding in any group of pilgrims.

While the visitors feasted in the isolated upper room, he had been given the task of guarding the stairway that led down to the street below. And there he sat now on the gallery, with his cloak rolled up for a pillow of sorts, and the warm, fresh wind of the Judean highlands making him so sleepy that only the discomfort of the stone wall against which he rested his cheek served to keep him awake at all.

Suddenly he shook himself with a start, for the door was creaking open.

Untangling his legs, which were stiff from being folded so long under him, he rose unsteadily just as the heavy wooden door was pushed out. In the gleam of light from the candles he could see the whole interior of the chamber, etched in still motion like the great friezes that decorated the Greek buildings in the town of Paphos in Cyprus, where he had grown up. The pilgrims, with their leader, were seated at a long table—all but one of them, who, holding his robe over his face, was quietly leaving the room.

And in that second that the door was open, John Mark heard their leader call out: "Judas, that thou doest, do quickly."

Then the door closed, and the one called Judas

hastened down the stairs, leaving John Mark standing again in the darkness.

For several minutes he could hear nothing from the closed room, and then, finally, they began to sing a psalm. According to custom, this meant that the Pass-over feast was finished. Soon the singing came to an end, and in a rustle of linen garments, the twelve remaining Galileans filed silently out of the room and down the stairs, with scarcely a glance at the puzzled boy who had kept watch for them.

But John Mark had forgotten about his weariness. Now must be the time for the secret meeting! Now he understood! If this man from Nazareth were truly the Messiah, as rumor had it, it would surely be his mission to wreak some catastrophe on the hated Roman soldiers who polluted the sacred land of Israel with their profane feet.

Then the end of the world was at hand! The Roman legions would be struck down like wheat in a burning field! The mighty fortress of Antonia would surely fall to the ground like the walls of Jericho!

As the last one of the Galileans reached the street below and turned into the darkness, John Mark quickly snatched up his cloak and hurried down the stairs like a young deer.

Through the crowds of pilgrims who thronged the great city even this late at night, he followed the Galileans out to the Water Gate the same way he had led John and Simon back that morning. Then, without a pause, through the gate they passed, and out onto the highroad toward Jericho.

Down a steep hill the road led into the Kidron valley

and, after a few hundred yards, up the slow ascent on the opposite side, and across the brow of the Mount of Olives.

As the little company began the climb up the Mount of Olives, John Mark hesitated. He had heard his uncle say that the pilgrims were staying in the village of Bethany, which lay a good mile and a half ahead. For all he knew, they might even be going past Bethany and on the first leg of their journey back to Galilee. It was late, and John Mark had never before been this far away from his home alone at night.

But then they stopped. Fifty feet ahead of him they clustered about a wooden gate in the stone wall that bordered the road, and after a moment the one called Simon swung the gate open. When they had all passed through, John Mark ran swiftly after them. It was nothing more than a small olive orchard, he discovered when he looked through the gate, and in the center he could see the heavy stone olive press—the *gethsemane*—with the Galileans gathered around it. Keeping well within the shadows, he slipped inside the gate and tip-toed through the lush grass of the orchard.

But again he was disappointed, for the little company did nothing except smooth the grass and seat themselves where the olive press would shield them from the sharp breeze. The leader—the one named Jesus—called Simon and two others and led them back farther into the shadows. By leaning carefully forward in the darkness, John Mark could hear the command he gave them. Simply, he said: "Come with me and keep watch, while I pray."

Quietly John Mark followed the little group to a

higher spot, where the bright Passover moon shone on them as sharply as the torches in the Temple. Hidden in the shadows of the gnarled trees, he could see their every movement and hear their every word.

Still waiting to learn the reason for all the secrecy that his uncle had impressed upon him, John Mark thought that now, in the far reaches of the garden, he might witness the unfolding of some desperate plot against the Romans—whom every pious Jew despised with a holy anger. It was to be the task of the Messiah, many of the Jews thought, to announce the kingdom of God by lighting the fires of hatred and war that would sweep the Romans from the throne of Jewry.

But—nothing like that happened. Nothing at all. Jesus had said that he was going apart to pray. And that was all that happened.

For long moment after long moment the olive grove was utterly silent. Ten minutes, fifteen, even as much as half an hour passed, and not a word broke the stillness, nor did a movement of men take place. Below, near the gate, the eight who had remained behind sat like great stones, waiting. In front of John Mark, in the open space under the moon, the other three sat with their backs against a gnarled tree. In the shifting glints of moonlight he saw their eyes completely closed, as if they were sleeping.

A few yards away their leader, Jesus, knelt in the shadow with his hands clenched before him, now up-raised to heaven, now beseeching, now praising—the classic posture of prayer. From time to time, as the wind shifted, John Mark could hear the muffled voice

of Jesus of Nazareth as he made his prayer to the great God.

It was a strange, a frightening time.

But suddenly it came to an end!

Half lulled and hypnotized by the murmur of the wind through the grove, John Mark had not heard the quiet bustle in the road outside the garden gate. Now, almost as if in a lightning flash, the night was split by forks of lantern light, and the silence was splintered by the rude shouts of a company of men.

Instantly the tableau changed. Across the darkness, John Mark could see Jesus lowering his hands and finishing his prayer. Slowly he made his way back down among his followers. The three who had huddled beside the gnarled tree in front of John Mark's hiding place came to their feet with a start, and the boy could tell by their frightened peering about that they had been lost in sleep.

As for the other eight, fearfully they drew close to Jesus as the company of intruders, armed with swords and staves, closed in on the little group.

Not a word had they spoken, the Galileans. Instead, they had simply retreated until they stood in a tight little group beside their leader, waiting his instructions.

Would they fight? Would they attempt to escape?

At last Jesus' strong, even voice broke the intolerable silence: "Lo, he that betrayeth me is at hand."

Out from the company of intruders stepped a man whom John Mark had seen before. It was the one they had called Judas, who had left the feast ahead of the others.

Into the pool of moonlight that separated the two

groups he walked deliberately and slowly until he stood before Jesus. Bowing his head slightly, he said but one word: "Master!" Then, in the fashion of the Orient, he kissed him lightly on the cheek.

John Mark could tell that this gesture was some signal, for instantly the company of intruders raised their staves and their short swords and moved forward to take Jesus in custody. As their hoods fell back from their faces, John Mark could recognize them—a company of Temple police.

Now, in the tense silence, one of the Galileans—the man John Mark had come to know as Simon—found the energy to throw aside his surprise and act. From the folds of his cloak he drew a short sword; lunging forward, he flailed his blade at the first of the guards to set a hand on Jesus. There was a sharp cry of pain, and the guard leaped hastily back, clutching at his bleeding ear.

The whole affair was so sudden that the rest of the police company was taken by surprise. Then, as if by some prearranged signal, all of them drew back to make room for a struggle.

But Jesus stopped the fight before it started. Stepping out in front of his little company and indicating with a wave of his hand that they were not to follow him, he shouted to the police: "Are ye come out, as against a thief, with swords and staves to take me? I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and ye took me not: but the scriptures must be fulfilled."

With that, he walked slowly forward. Realizing that there would be no more trouble, his captors quickly surrounded him and led him down the path toward

the gate of the garden, while two or three of them turned savagely to the rest of the Galileans with their swords upraised.

Their leader gone, confused, anguished with fright, the Galileans made no attempt to fight back. Crying with rage and despair, they gathered the hems of their cloaks in their hands and disappeared into the sheltering darkness of the upper garden, each of them seeking the nearest way to safety. Some of the soldiers laughed and chased after them a few paces, but most of them minded the sober business of taking Jesus quietly back into Jerusalem.

All except one. With a flourish he cut his sword through the bushes to see that no last one of the Galileans remained behind to follow after them. But it was no idle thrust to John Mark. The bright tip of the sword flashed within an inch of his knees, and with a yelp of terror he fell backward and sprawled on the ground.

"Oho," cried the guard in glee, "here's another of them!"

But he was not swift enough for the task of catching the young boy. Springing to his feet, John Mark raced down the rocky slope and past the company of guards, his eyes on one thing only—the gate that opened on the highway.

And as he passed nearly within arm's length of the captain, he could hear the guards laughing: "They even bring children to be followers of this prophet."

The guard who laughed the loudest suddenly reached out his arm as John Mark passed and caught a firm hold on his cloak. A pang of terror spurred the

boy ahead. Twisting his body, he shook out of his cloak and left it in the guard's hands, while he sped on in the darkness, clad only in the thin loincloth that was all that men wore beneath their cloaks.

Another step, a stumbling jump through the gate, and he was out on the highway to Jerusalem.

Behind him, as he ran, he could hear the harsh, cruel laughter pounding after him like waves of cold water.

3. THE AMAZING EVENTS ON THE FIFTIETH DAY

IT WAS THE MIDDLE of the morning on a bright, fresh day nearly two months after the frightening and amazing events in the grove of the *gethsemane*.

As was customary, John Mark was deep in his lessons at this hour—the study of mathematics and the mastery of the fluid Greek dialect known as *koine*, which was spoken in every quarter of the western world. Those were two subjects it was most important for any man engaged in trade to know perfectly, and it was John Mark's most urgent wish to become proficient in them as soon as possible so that he could begin to carry on at least a part of the daily affairs of the vast trading enterprise that his father had left to him.

But it was time for rest now, and for relaxation. The boy sat on a bench near the window, and as he ate his late breakfast of cheese and goat's milk, he watched the gathering of Galileans in the courtyard with eager curiosity.

Ever since the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, his followers had been quartered in the large house that belonged to John Mark's mother. There was nothing strange about this to the boy, for it was quite cus-

tomary for religious pilgrims to be given permanent lodging by wealthy families; and when the first horror of the Crucifixion had passed, the Temple authorities seemed to give up concern for the little company of Galileans who had claimed the Nazarene to be the Messiah. There was no longer any need for secrecy. They came and went about their business quite openly, and day by day more and more of the Jerusalem Jews came to listen to the preaching of their leader, Simon, who bore the nickname of Peter, which meant, in Greek, the Rock. Even now, as John Mark watched, there were at least fifty people crowded in the great open courtyard.

When Simon stopped speaking and the people began to talk to each other, John Mark rose from his bench to go on with his lessons. Meantime, Basilleus had come silently into the room through the open doorway.

John Mark smiled at the kindly Greek overseer. "Simon has been telling that story again. About Jesus in the Temple, overturning the stalls of the money-changers."

"Yes, I heard it," Basilleus replied.

"It doesn't sound like a simple story about everyday things. It . . . it sounds like one of the stories out of our book of Judges, or out of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah."

Basilleus nodded. "Or like one of the legends of the gods of Greece, that Vergil or Horace might have told."

John Mark sat down at his work table and took up the wax tablet that he used for pondering sums in mathematics. But he did not return to his assignments.

"What are they doing here, day after day, every day?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" Basilleus replied.

"The Galileans. Ever since Jesus was executed they have done nothing but wait, it seems. Just wait."

He paused and appeared embarrassed. "Not that I would be inhospitable, Basilleus. We have plenty for all. They are welcome, of course. It is only that I was wondering—what are they waiting for?"

Basilleus shook his head slowly. "I do not know. Simon has told me what it is they are waiting for, but still I do not understand it. When the one from Nazareth appeared to them after his death on the cross, he told them to wait in Jerusalem until they were embued with power from on high."

"Power from on high?" the boy asked, with a puzzled frown on his face.

Basilleus shrugged. "Alas, young friend, I know no more than you do what it means. We can only wait with them and see what happens."

There was a silence. Quietly John Mark picked up his wax tablet and began to wipe it smooth so that he could do another practice problem. Across the table Basilleus seemed lost in thought. Usually the overseer chattered on at these lessons like an Egyptian parrot, but now, for once, he seemed to have nothing at all to say. Instead, his thoughts seemed a thousand leagues away.

In that moment their reverie was broken by a strange and sudden noise that seemed to come from the courtyard. John Mark and Basilleus rose from the table like puppets on a single string and ran across the

room to the window. In the street outside the courtyard they could see passers-by craning their necks to look up at the sky.

For it was out of the sky that the strange noise seemed to come. There was a rush and a roar as if a hurricane had settled on the great city. Yet there was not the slightest stirring in the air.

Then came a strange light! Like flashes of lightning, bursts of almost blinding white light flooded the courtyard, seeming to hover for an instant over the heads of the Galileans!

Then, as quickly as it had come, the sound and the light ceased. For an instant everything was as still as death. Not a man moved. Not a sound was heard.

Slowly, and then with a growing urgency, the awed crowd came to life from their strange surprise. Almost to a man, they started to shout out to try to tell others what had happened.

In the noise and the din John Mark was aware of a strange and wonderful thing. Every one of the fifty or more men in the courtyard was talking rapidly and excitedly with his neighbors. But it was not talk in any language that John Mark had ever heard before. To the boy, they seemed to be speaking utter gibberish!

"What are they saying, Basilleus? What is happening? I can't understand a word of what they're saying!" John Mark clutched at the Greek overseer's cloak and pointed into the court.

Basilleus turned to his companion in wonder and astonishment. "They are speaking strange and alien languages! These Galileans couldn't even speak proper Hebrew a minute ago, let alone an honest brand of

Greek. And now they're speaking Greek, Persian, Egyptian, and every language I've ever heard."

Awed and frightened at the strange happening, Basilleus fled down the stairs and into the courtyard, followed on his very heels by John Mark. By the time they came out of the house into the center court, all pandemonium had broken loose. Strangers and mere passers-by, hearing the commotion and the confusion of tongues, had poured into the courtyard until several hundred people had packed into the space that fifty had occupied only a few moments earlier.

"The power from on high," whispered Basilleus to John Mark. "This must be that power—to speak in all the tongues!"

The amazed spectators in the courtyard seemed to understand, even as Basilleus was saying, that this was the wondrous sign that God had promised the disciples who were waiting in Jerusalem. One of them rushed forward to call out: "Brethren, what shall we do?"

Like an avalanche, the roar of their voices increased as all of them took up the cry: "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

For a moment Basilleus stepped forward as if to protect John Mark against the outbreak of a riot, but Simon Peter simply raised his two arms above his head, and slowly the crowd rumbled to silence. At last, when a hush filled the courtyard, he spoke: "Repent, and be baptized, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Basilleus nodded his head in wonder. "That was the sign," he kept muttering. "The gift of the Holy Spirit

that made them able to speak in every language was the sign that God gave so that all men could know and believe."

As they watched, the crowd—now humble and silent—pressed forward to beg baptism from Simon and the other disciples. Hastily the Galileans improvised a place in the center of the great fountain in the courtyard, and hour after hour the crowd massed to accept the ceremony that John the Baptist had used to prove repentance a few years earlier.

At last, as the sun sank behind the walls of the city, the courtyard was empty. John Mark had returned to his rooms long before this, for the wonder of the hour had worn off. But now, to find Basilleus, he returned to the fountain.

"Basilleus!" he called.

He was answered from within the shadow in one corner of the yard. Crossing, he found the Greek overseer standing beside a bench, and Simon, relaxed with weariness, sitting in happy repose.

John Mark started to speak and then hesitated.

"What was it, young master?" offered Basilleus.

"I was only wondering . . . wondering if I, too, might be baptized by Simon. Or am I yet too young?"

Simon smiled. "According to our traditions, John Mark, you have passed your thirteenth birthday and have become a man in the Congregation of Israel. Of course you can accept baptism. Your Uncle Mordecai and your blessed mother have already presented themselves. We would have thought it strange if you did not."

John Mark smiled with relief. "I am glad. All the

afternoon I watched from the window of my room, wondering if I would be considered brash if I came forward. I only saw Jesus of Nazareth for a few hours. But for those few hours I was one of his close company. I know that I believe. And now I want to serve."

Simon rose from the bench and, placing his strong hand on the boy's shoulder, started to lead him to the fountain.

But John Mark held back: "What about Basilleus here? Perhaps he does not want to speak up, being our Greek overseer, but he also has been struck by the wonder of today's events. If it is possible, I would like him to have the chance . . . if he wants."

Eagerly the Greek stepped forward. "Yes . . . yes . . . I do believe all that I have heard and seen. I would not have come forward like this, being only the overseer in the house. But John Mark has truly spoken what is in my heart. I have heard and seen the sign. I want to join the company of Nazarenes."

Simon frowned and shook his head: "By accepting the ceremony of circumcision and by taking the vows of our congregation, Basilleus can become a proselyte of the Jews as any Gentile can. Then, when he has become a Jew in our congregation, he may come before us for baptism and join the growing company of the followers of the Nazarene."

"But not as a Gentile?" asked John Mark, and the hurt in his voice reflected the pain on Basilleus' face.

"No," replied Simon, "Jesus of Nazareth was sent by the God of the Hebrews—"

"To be a light unto the Gentiles," interrupted Basil-

leus eagerly, "to make disciples of all nations. I have heard you telling it here in the courtyard."

Simon shook his head slowly. "But only to those who enter the Congregation of Israel, Basilleus. You have seen Jesus. You can acknowledge him as the *Meshiach*. But you cannot become one of his company so long as you are a Gentile and accept gentile ways."

For an endless moment Basilleus looked at Simon, and then, with his shoulders sagging in disappointment, he shuffled from the courtyard. To John Mark, his beloved friend and teacher seemed to have aged a dozen years as he heard Simon's pronouncement.

4. FLAMES OF ANGER

THE REFUSAL OF ADMITTANCE into the company of the followers of Jesus marked a definite turning point in the life of the kind and learned Greek overseer. While he continued to serve every need of Simon Peter and the other Apostles and to help and support them in every way, he no longer actually joined in their company as they gathered each evening in the large common room of the great house. Instead, he spent many lonely hours by himself, devoting his time exclusively to the details of the trading business that provided the money for the household.

"Why does not Basilleus want to obey the injunctions of Israel?" John Mark inquired of his uncle. "It would seem a simple matter to accept the rite of circumcision and to take the vows of our religion. Why doesn't he do that, and then he can join our faith and become a true follower of Jesus of Nazareth?"

Mordecai understood what John Mark did not. The Greeks and Romans had a fierce pride in their own cultures and simply would not accept the idea that God would serve only the Jews. "Basilleus feels that any human being has the right to pledge his faith directly in Jesus of Nazareth," Mordecai answered. "He will not accept the truth that we Jews know—that

Jesus was sent to the Jews, and only through the Jews to bring salvation to all mankind. When the right time comes, all men will become pious and obedient members of the Congregation of Israel, and only then will the eternal plan of the Almighty God take effect for the world. Basilleus wants to wait, but he can not outwait God."

That was the puzzle that could not be solved. Simon Peter would not accept Basilleus as a believer in Jesus until Basilleus accepted conversion to Judaism. On the other hand, Basilleus refused to give up his Greek culture and become a Jew. It was no puzzle that John Mark could solve, and he wisely refrained from questioning Basilleus about the inner turmoil that troubled his soul.

Thus the months grew into years. The great house in Jerusalem became known the length and breadth of Judea as headquarters of the Nazarenes—the name given to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

And slowly, as their numbers grew, their danger increased.

The priests in the Temple had crucified Jesus not because of any anger they held for the Galileans, but simply because it was their idea that Jesus had committed the crime of blasphemy. He had done this in their eyes by claiming to be the Messiah.

After his death they made no attempts to persecute his followers—at first. The Nazarenes were allowed to come and go about their affairs without any molestation.

But as the wonder of the miracle of the Resurrection spread through Judea and more and more people ac-

cepted this sign from God that Jesus was truly the Anointed Lord, their numbers began to increase rapidly. From a few hundred to a few thousand and then to more thousands the Nazarenes increased, until it began to frighten the priests that this new religious movement would engulf all of Jewry.

It was not to punish the Nazarene leaders, then, but to stop the growth of the movement that the persecutions began, and it was a young Nazarene, Stephen, who brought matters to a head.

This man had only recently joined the company of the Nazarenes, but his piety, his wisdom, and the strength of his character were so strong that he had been appointed one of the seven officials to collect alms and manage the distribution of these alms to the poor among the Nazarenes in Jerusalem.

The trouble broke out in a synagogue belonging to a company of Jews who came from Alexandria in Egypt. Stephen had gone there to preach to these Alexandrians, and as he told the message of the resurrection of Jesus and its meaning for mankind, a fire of hatred began to blaze in the hearts of some of his listeners.

"This Stephen is telling us that we ought not to obey the Law of Moses any longer," hissed one of them while Stephen was talking.

"Not that," his friend replied. "He is saying that Jesus of Nazareth has fulfilled the Law of Moses, and that therefore the law is no longer necessary."

"It is the same thing. It is blasphemy. They taught this man Jesus the danger of blasphemy, and crucified him. Now I think his followers need to learn some of that lesson."

In a moment the synagogue was in an uproar. "Blasphemy! Blasphemy! Blasphemy!" was the shout, led by the man who had started it all.

But in the rear of the room sat three men who were not so much interested in religious matters as in treachery. "Let us hale this fellow Stephen before the High Priest," they plotted. "The High Priest has been seeking some scandal against the Nazarenes in order to punish them more severely. We will swear on oath that he committed blasphemy, and surely we will be rewarded."

They thrust themselves quickly through the milling mob, and before the others had noticed, they had surrounded Stephen, had hustled him out of the hall, and were taking him through the streets of Jerusalem bound for the Temple.

As they had plotted, the High Priest was indeed happy to have some course of evil action laid so neatly in his grasp. Smiling craftily, he interviewed the villains: "You will testify that this man uttered blasphemy?" he asked them cautiously.

"For a reward, yes," the leader of them assured.

The High Priest considered a moment, and then set fifty minas of silver on the table. "Surely this is reward enough," he suggested.

With a sly smile, one of the Alexandrians pocketed the coins. "It is enough to pay for the simple truth," he laughed. "And for such pay we will swear it is the truth."

In that way was the trial of Stephen set in motion.

Late that same afternoon, while the residents of John Mark's great house were gone about their duties

in various parts of the city, a loud knock sounded on the heavy courtyard door. Laying aside a task that was engaging him, John Mark went down to the street and admitted a servant of the High Priest—a servant who had secretly been one of the Nazarenes since the day of Pentecost.

"Find me Simon Peter," whispered the servant in urgent terror.

"He is not here," John Mark replied. "He went out early in the day and has not yet returned. What is the matter?"

"It is Stephen. They have summoned the Great Council and have Stephen on trial for blasphemy. Certain Alexandrians have sworn to give false evidence, so that Stephen may be found truly guilty. You know the law. Death by stoning."

There was a sharp silence as John Mark weighed the situation in his mind. He realized that the servant would not have risked bringing the news unless the danger were real and urgent. And yet there was no help available. All of the Apostles were gone. John Mark quickly made his own decision.

"Basilleus! Basilleus!" he called.

Far in the back of the house the Greek overseer heard his name being called in panic, and he ran to his young master in the courtyard.

Quickly John Mark repeated what the Temple servant had told him. "What can we do, Basilleus? What can we do?" he begged.

Instantly the Greek had a plan. "You wait here," he commanded. "Wait until John and Simon Peter re-

turn and tell them what this servant has told us. I will go now to the Temple and see what help I can give."

John Mark nodded eagerly as the overseer tightened his cloak around his bronzed, strong body. And as he left to hasten to the Temple, Basilleus gave one more command: "When John and Simon Peter return, tell them that if the trial is over, they should hasten to the Field of Stoning. I will stay with Stephen to the end, if necessary."

The Field of Stoning—that bleak precipice outside the city walls where criminals were stoned and left to die!

For the better part of an hour John Mark waited near the doorway to the great house. High over the troubled city the shadows of evening had begun to fall, and it was nearly the hour of *minchah*, the evening sacrifice, before John and Simon returned together.

Breathlessly John Mark gave them the message. Stephen had been taken before the Great Council, charged with blasphemy! There were false witnesses to swear on oath against him! Even now he might be paying the punishment for that grave crime—death by stoning!

John and Simon needed no more than a fraction of a moment to decide what they must do. John to the Temple to testify for Stephen if the trial was still in session. As for Simon Peter—to the field where the criminals were taken! If the trial was finished and Stephen convicted, perhaps he could yet be saved by some miracle at the very hour of his death.

And John Mark?

There was no question in his mind. He was a Nazarene, and he would go wherever it was required. Without a word to anyone, he slipped out of the gate and followed the hastening, burly figure of Simon Peter through the crowded streets.

Faster and faster he had to walk to keep the long-legged fisherman from Capernaum in sight. Clambering up the steep hills of the winding streets, over the cobblestones, was almost like a punishment in itself.

And then, after nearly fifteen minutes of grueling pursuit, he caught up with Simon Peter when he stopped to question a crowd of laborers who were coming back into the city through the Damascus Gate. As he came close, he could hear the exchange of question and answer: "What was all the excitement that had brought so many people crowding up toward the Field of Stoning?"

"Nothing strange. Just a blasphemer being brought to pay his penalty."

"Does anyone know the blasphemer's name?"

No one knew his name. "He was just another of the foolish Nazarenes."

Simon Peter muttered a prayer to himself and pushed on through the crowd. John Mark hastened fast on Simon Peter's heels, and within a matter of minutes they were through the gate and on the high-road to Damascus.

And here, within a few hundred paces of the city wall, was the Field of Stoning.

It was a bleak and barren field cluttered with stones and boulders larger than a man's head. Near the center

of the field they could see a small group of people huddled around the body of a man. Simon Peter clutched his cloak in his hands and broke into a run.

There was no question about it. The sentence of death by stoning had been given, and the false witnesses had done their duty well. Crushed and bleeding, Stephen's body was bruised almost beyond recognition. When Simon Peter and John Mark appeared, way was made for them by the few grieving Nazarenes who were wrapping the martyr in a large cloth for proper burial.

"When they asked him if Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, he testified," one of them reported in a broken voice.

"To the very High Priest himself he spoke out—'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God,'" another continued.

There were tears in Simon's eyes as he helped wrap the shroud around the body of the brave martyr—the first martyr of the new faith. But John Mark was not watching Simon Peter. A few yards away, half hidden by a large rock, was the one he was seeking. Quickly John Mark ran and knelt beside the broken, bleeding form of the Greek, Basilleus. He was breathing! He was still alive!

"Simon Peter! Simon Peter! Come quickly! Basilleus is still alive!"

The little company of Nazarenes laid down their task and hastily gathered around John Mark.

"How . . . how did he get here?" asked Simon Peter.

"They could not sentence him. He is a Greek, not a Jew."

"He tried to save Stephen," John Mark spoke up through the sobs that wracked his voice. "He was with me in our house when the message came that Stephen was arrested. He tried to help Stephen."

The Greek found some last reserve of strength, and raised his head. "I . . . I tried to . . . fight them off . . . to take Stephen away . . . to hide him . . . but they beat me down . . . with stones."

But there was no more strength, only the sharp lines of pain on his face. "Simon," he whispered. "Simon . . . listen to me."

Simon Peter bent his head close to Basilleus' lips.

"Simon Peter, companion of the Lord Jesus . . . the Anointed One . . . whom we in Greek call the *Christos*, I was not born a Jew, nor do I die a Jew. I cannot be baptized into the congregation of the company of Nazarenes. I am a Greek. But, Simon Peter, tell me this. I have faith in Jesus of Nazareth. As the Messiah, he came to the Jews. But as the Risen Lord for all men, I have faith in him."

He coughed, and his hands clenched in pain. But he continued.

"Tell me, Simon Peter. Is my faith wasted?"

Simon Peter looked up at the little company and pleaded with his eyes that they help him solve this great problem. But there was no answer in any face. They were all Jews and understood only the Jewish laws. Sorrowfully they looked down at Basilleus and shook their heads.

And then Simon Peter remembered. "There was a Roman centurion in the town of Capernaum whose servant was sick to death. And he begged that Jesus heal him. That was faith like yours, Basilleus. And I remember the very words of Jesus to the centurion—"Truly, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

He paused, and took one of Basilleus' hands in his own. "Nor in Israel today, good Basilleus, is there faith like your faith. It is not wasted."

Basilleus smiled feebly and whispered, "Then now I have found the life he promised, for I have lost my life for his sake."

As he made that statement, the signs of pain began to disappear from his face, and a great relaxation came over him. He smiled again, and then whispered to John Mark. "Young master, bend down and listen. I have a last lesson for you."

John Mark placed his cooling hand on the bruised forehead of the man who had loved him so deeply.

"Young master, you will be long with this company. I have taught you much, how to speak with the Greeks and the Romans, the Persians and the Egyptians. This has been my gift to you. The fires of hatred are beginning to blaze in Israel with the death of Stephen, but there is a great world outside that will listen and hear and obey. Your gift shall be to tell all mankind the wonderful story of Jesus of Nazareth, the Risen Lord of the world, who came to earth to redeem Jew and Gentile alike. Your lessons are finished, young student. Now it is time for you to become a teacher."

And the Greek overseer who had given his life in

the vain attempt to save Stephen slipped away into unconsciousness.

Together they wept for this man—the boy, John Mark, and Simon Peter, the Galilean fisherman.

5. THE GATEWAY TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE

THE SUDDEN, TRAGIC DEATH of Basilleus brought immediate changes into the life of John Mark. Not only did the sharp sorrow at this disastrous turn of events mature the sixteen-year-old boy almost overnight, but it brought him suddenly to the point of having to make certain major decisions about his own life for the first time in his young years.

The first—and most important—decision of all took place no more than a week after the cruel execution of Stephen and the death of the Greek overseer. It was his uncle who spelled out the problem to John Mark and his mother as they sat early one evening in the common room of their great house.

“Sister,” Mordecai explained, tugging thoughtfully at his thin beard, “I believe it would be best, now, if I helped you sell this house and you took John Mark back to Paphos on the island of Cyprus. So long as the Greek was here with you, to look over your business affairs, Jerusalem was as good a city as any for you. But now I believe it would be wiser to return to the circle of your husband’s business associates and friends in Paphos.”

As Mordecai pronounced his considered judgment,

John Mark's mother bowed her head in quiet acknowledgment. For so many years she had been at the beck and call of the powerful man who had been her husband that the very idea of making any decisions about her life was foreign to her.

But Mordecai failed to estimate the changes that had taken place in John Mark's spirit. He was no longer a boy; the events of the past months, and particularly the events of the past week, had made him a man.

"Revered uncle," he announced, clearing his throat in an effort to find a somewhat deeper voice than his young years had given him. "I believe that it would be better if we stayed in Jerusalem."

"You believe . . . what?"

"I believe it would be better to stay in Jerusalem. We do not have many friends here—that is true—but we do not need friends. We have money. I will make mistakes, I know, but since my father died, Basilleus has taught me everything I should know about managing a trading venture. I even have a list of all the traders throughout the Roman Empire that my father ever dealt with."

"But you are only a boy," exclaimed Mordecai.

"When my father was living, I was a boy," replied John Mark. "Now I am a man. I am sixteen years old, which is already two or three years beyond the time when many young men are working hard at their trades. As for my trade, which is commerce between cities, of course there is a lot I do not know. But I shall always be learning more at that trade. If I wait until

I know it all, I'll never leave my house until they carry me to my grave."

His uncle snorted. It was true that most young men in that part of the world were well on the road to making their own way in life when they entered their sixteenth year, but it was difficult for him to imagine that John Mark, whom he had always thought of as his sister's boy-child, was already at that stage in his life. But he had to face the facts. "Well and good," he was forced to agree. "But why Jerusalem? Why not Paphos? You can manage your trading ventures as well, if not better, from Paphos as from here—this hostile city."

"I will tell you," John Mark replied. "Just wait here a minute."

He rose quickly from his seat and left the room. In his absence Mordecai stared silently at his sister, but neither the old man nor John Mark's mother had a word to say. Both were quite overwhelmed by the boy's sure and quick ascendancy to the head of the household. Only one thought ran through Miriam's mind—just yesterday, it seems, he was a toddling baby; now he has taken his father's place; I cannot understand it.

A moment later John Mark returned with Simon Peter.

The powerfully built Galilean fisherman stared at Mordecai and Miriam with a question in his eyes. It was obvious that he did not know what had been discussed in the room or why he had been asked to join the discussion.

John Mark started to speak. At first he blurted out

his words, for he wanted above all to give Simon Peter the definite impression that he was old enough and mature enough to make up his mind and to take on the responsibilities of the head of the house. This was the first time he had ever spoken with Simon Peter, or with any of the Galileans, except as the young son of their guardian-hostess' household.

"We have had a great change in our household since the death of Stephen and Basilleus," John Mark announced.

"We have all come to know a great change," Simon Peter replied. "Perhaps greater than any of us have realized. Before last week we were a peaceful company of the Jews, going about our own business and free to follow our own beliefs in the matter of the coming of the kingdom of God. Now all is different. The attack on Stephen has been a signal for all the self-righteous and those who quibble about jots and tittles in the Temple to make outlaws of us. There are dangerous times ahead."

"We know that," John Mark said. "But let me continue—concerning Basilleus. You knew him only as the overseer of the estate that my father left. But he was more than that. He has been my teacher and companion. He has been teaching me the details of managing trading ventures, so that when the time should come, I could take over my father's estate and manage it properly."

Simon Peter nodded. He had never inquired into the intimate details of the household that sheltered him, but he understood that Basilleus was more like a business manager than a hired servant.

"That time has come," continued John Mark. "The men who killed Basilleus unwittingly turned over the estate to me, whether or not I was old enough or ready enough to manage it. It is done, and now the decisions must be mine."

He paused briefly and looked at his mother for guidance. She nodded her head to indicate that whatever decision her son would make, it would be right.

"I hope to live a good, long life," John Mark said slowly, thinking with great concentration as he talked, "and I hope that I have learned enough of my father's business that it shall always be successful. So that I shall have money, not for its own sake, but to do important things. With that money I want to help you and your companions carry on your work, preaching the story of Jesus of Nazareth—crucified, and resurrected on the third day. That is why I want to remain in Jerusalem. So that I can be a part of that work."

Mordecai only looked in perplexity at his young nephew, who was turning out to know much more than even he did about the preaching of the Galileans. Miriam smiled a beautiful smile at her son. The teachings of Simon Peter and his companions had given her great comfort in her widowhood, and she was experiencing a deep thrill to see that the belief in Jesus of Nazareth was not merely a widow's whim, but that it was exciting and compelling enough to have attracted this studious and often puzzling young man of affairs who was her son.

"Basilleus taught me that the world is much larger than Jerusalem, or even than Judea and Galilee," continued John Mark breathlessly. "And there is nothing

to prevent us from taking our knowledge of God out into the larger world. Maybe the Gentiles can't join our Temple worship and become members of the true Congregation of Israel. But even Greeks and Romans can have faith in Jesus of Nazareth! It is up to us to take our knowledge of Jesus and his message to them!"

John Mark looked about him—at his mother, at his uncle, at Simon Peter. He was triumphant with this new idea that had grown upon him.

But they had no answer. John Mark was speaking with a new and strange voice that had never been heard in Israel in all the hundreds of years since God met Moses on the heights of Mount Sinai.

And it was with that same wonderful fervor of the discovery of a new idea that John Mark plunged the next day into the business of managing the great trading venture he had inherited—the commercial company that reached out from Jerusalem like an octopus, with tentacles in Rome, in Athens, in Alexandria, in Damascus, and even deep into Persia, its caravans trading cargoes of wheat, olive oil, spices, bolts of linen, and hundreds of other items of vast commerce in that lively day and age when the Roman Empire was at its flowering height.

Dictating orders to buy and orders to sell to the scribe whom Basilleus had hired, he dispatched a camel train to Antioch on the next day, laden with cargo of rich purple dyestuffs that had been resting in the storage-rooms below the house. When the camel train left with its orders, John Mark did not know whether he would actually make or lose any money on the venture, but the important thing was that the cara-

van drivers and his agents would understand that he was quite capable of managing the enterprise and that he meant to push forward with the business.

Once the camel train was safely on its way to the north through the Damascus Gate, he shook the fears and worries from his shoulders. The deed was done, and for better or worse, he was a trader.

But trading, as he well knew, was much more of a matter than sitting in his great house and dispatching camel trains across the deserts. Traders must travel to trade, and if John Mark was to build up the great business he had inherited, he knew that he must find some way to travel out from Jerusalem.

There was one problem that puzzled him, however. Despite the fact that he had grown like a reed, he was still a boy, and a very inexperienced boy at that. Until he became much more seasoned in the sharp business of trading, he knew that he would need much help from older men on whom he could rely.

This problem he took to Simon Peter.

"Did I overhear you say you are going to Joppa?" he asked, when he located the burly Apostle in the common room of the house.

"Yes," Simon Peter answered. "I had planned to leave at sunup tomorrow."

"Good," John Mark replied enthusiastically. "I have been wondering just how I could handle this situation, and now I know. I have been in correspondence with a trader in Joppa, bidding for a supply of fine flax. In our letters he had no way of knowing that I was just a boy, and he has kept his prices well down. However, if I go there myself, the minute he realizes I am not an

experienced trader, he will probably cheat me out of all of my profit. I would never know it if he did. So, now that you are going to Joppa, I will go with you and let you do the trading. The trader there will never know the difference."

Simon Peter smiled. "You're to be my young companion, is that it? And who am I to be?"

The boy laughed with flashing teeth. "You are to be none other than Simon Peter of Jerusalem, the agent of John Mark the merchant."

Simon Peter pondered this a moment, and then a huge grin splashed across his round face. "There is certainly no dishonesty in that, my young companion, and yet it will persuade your merchant in Joppa that no trickery of any sort will be tolerated."

The two laughed, and in John Mark's heart there welled up a spring of strength and confidence. He had mastered his fears, and he no longer felt himself to be a boy trying to do a man's job.

The following morning the sun had scarcely touched the gray hills around the Holy City when the fisherman and his young companion were astride their mules, lumbering down the highroad toward the distant ocean and the busy towns that lay in the lowlands. And late the same night the two travelers completed their thirty-mile journey and entered the seacoast city of Joppa—tired, dusty, and hot. A comfortable bed in the house of one of the Nazarenes of Joppa repaired their weariness, and the following morning they sought through the town for the warehouse of the merchant they had come to visit. Then followed several hours of jovial and amiable bargaining. Truly, the greatest

pleasures in the life of a trader were the long arguments with other traders over the consignments of goods that were bought and sold. These debates over price, quality, and other such matters were endless, though never bitter. They were, in fact, the custom of the country.

Finally the matter was settled, and John Mark—with Simon Peter's help—purchased the bales of flax at the price he had planned originally, which happened also to be the price the seller had himself originally hoped to get, and thus both parties were happy. As for John Mark, the experience gave him great confidence and taught him that he never need worry about his ability to manage the great enterprise that he had inherited. He was every bit as shrewd as his father, and the idea occurred to him that he need not even worry about being taken for a boy any longer. Young though he was, he had his father's sharp sense of values, Basilleus' wit, and his own poise and self-confidence. From that moment on he felt himself to be a man among men, the proud manager of a trading business that would be both interesting and profitable.

When finally the business was done and orders had been given to the owner of a caravan to load the bales and proceed to Jerusalem, John Mark and Simon Peter took themselves back to the house where they were staying. By this time the word had passed through all the city that the leader of the Jerusalem Nazarenes was visiting Joppa, accompanied by the rich young merchant, John Mark. Until late in the day a large company gathered to listen to Simon Peter preach, and to hear the news from Jerusalem and the other cities

of the Empire where the Nazarene communities had taken root. All such news filtered into Jerusalem as a matter of course, and from the Holy City it was taken by travelers to other towns and cities throughout the Roman world. It was in that way that the followers of Jesus the Risen Lord kept in close touch with each other as the years passed.

The next morning the two travelers rose early and made their customary devotions before starting back on the journey up through the highlands to their capital city. When their devotions were completed, John Mark left Simon Peter on the shaded roof of the house while he paid a second visit to the warehouse to see that his shipment of flax was loaded and ready for the trip. At last, as the sun swung high in the noon sky, all matters were in readiness for the trip, and John Mark returned to the house to fetch his traveling companion.

At the house he was told that Simon Peter was still secluded in prayer and study on the roof, but that all of their belongings were packed and ready. Leaving his companion to himself until the moment of departure, the young man gathered up his own belongings and directed the servants how to lash them properly on the back of the donkey that was tethered in the dooryard.

Just as he was about to go up to the roof to call Simon Peter, there was a loud knocking on the outer door of the house. Three times the knocking was repeated, and because of the sharp insistence of the raps, John Mark knew that it was no ordinary caller. With

some concern he went with the household servant who opened the door.

There was a quick catch of fear in his heart as John Mark saw that the visitors were not Jews, but Romans—three of them.

Keenly aware of the dangers that were beginning to beset the Nazarenes from the Jerusalem authorities, John Mark huddled back into the shadows. One of the visitors was a foot soldier. The other two were servants, but from the manner of their dress, obviously the servants of some high official. He listened carefully as they spoke.

"We have journeyed from Caesarea at the request of our master. We have been sent to see a man named Simon, a Galilean. Is he in this house?"

The household servant who had opened the door hesitated. Sometimes it was best to pretend not to have understood the question. Roman soldiers seeking to enter the homes of honest Jews usually meant trouble of some sort.

The visitors repeated the question, and John Mark had a sudden inspiration. Stepping out before the soldier he asked, in fluent and elegant Greek, "Who is it you seek?"

The soldier recognized the authority in John Mark's facile use of the Greek tongue and bowed his head servilely, as John Mark had expected. Until he found out what it was that the visitors wanted, he proposed to play the part of an influential officer of the Empire.

"Our master has sent us to seek Simon, a Galilean and the leader of the Nazarenes," the soldier replied humbly.

"Who is your master?"

"Our master is the centurion Titus Flavius Cornelius, attached to the Emperor's troops in Caesarea—a day's journey to the north."

John Mark considered very carefully. What he had to say next must sound extremely calm and unimportant. He had to discover whether or not the Romans were seeking to imprison Simon Peter at the behest of the priests of the Temple. "Do you have an official order for the householder here to deliver this man Simon, or is it merely a personal visit that you are seeking to make?" he asked.

The soldier looked uncomfortable. At last he said, "Are you a Jew?"

"Why do you ask?" inquired John Mark.

"My visit has something to do with the God of the Jews. Our master prayed to the Jewish God, and last night in a dream his prayer was answered. 'Send to Joppa,' he was told in his dream, 'for one Simon, and he shall tell thee what thou shouldest do.'"

This was something John Mark could not understand. It was the last answer he had expected, and yet he somehow knew that it was no trick. For some reason or other, this high Roman officer in Caesarea, the centurion Cornelius, had sought an approach to the great God of the Jews, as had Basilleus. And he, like Basilleus, would only be rebuffed and refused. Slowly John Mark replied, "Wait here. I will see to this matter."

Climbing the stairs to the roof, John Mark called softly for his companion. "Simon Peter," he began, "there are . . ."

"Three men come to seek me?" replied the Galilean, rising from his bench.

"How did you know?" asked John Mark.

Simon Peter came toward him. The young man could see that great questions were bothering the Apostle. His eyes reflected the trouble that lay on his heart. "I have had a vision," the fisherman told him. "While I was praying, my mind went into a trance, and three times a vision came to me. I cannot understand it. I do not know what it means."

"What was the vision?"

Simon Peter raised his eyes to the skies and stretched his huge arms in the air. "Down from the skies there was lowered a great vessel, like a sheet held at four corners by ropes. In this net were all manner of animals that we Jews are forbidden to eat by our religious laws. As I watched, a voice said to me, 'Rise, Peter, kill and eat.'

"But I could not," he continued, "for all these animals were unclean and forbidden. I was horrified. I replied, 'Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.'"

John Mark nodded his head. Simon Peter's strict adherence to the diet and food laws of the Jewish faith was almost a legend among the Nazarenes, so careful was he not to break any one of them, however slight.

"But the voice continued—'What God hath cleansed, that call thou not common.'"

"And then?" the boy pressed him.

"And then the voice told me that three men would

come to seek me and that I should go with them, doubting nothing. Are they here?"

"They come from a Roman centurion."

"Then I must go to them."

Simon Peter started down the stairs, but John Mark held to his arm. "Do you think there is any chance of a trick? That they mean to arrest you on orders from the Temple?"

Slowly the big fisherman shook his head. "No, God has chosen this time to unveil some mystery to me. God works his wonders in strange and mysterious ways, and it is not for men to know. But I go as the voice directed me—doubting not."

John Mark paused, and then asked in some hesitation, "Shall I go with you?"

Simon Peter shook his head. "No, it were better not. I do not know where I am going, or why. You had best return to Jerusalem to wait for me there and to tell our company of this strange turn of events."

John Mark bowed his head at the command. Despite the fact that he worried for the safety of the great good man who traveled with him, he was still the young neophyte and Simon Peter the leader of the whole company of Nazarenes. He could do nothing but obey.

From the roof of the house he silently watched the three visitors stand aside humbly while Simon Peter mounted his donkey, and then the four of them took off slowly toward the north road—to Caesarea and the unknown.

Back in the great house in Jerusalem the news that Simon Peter had gone to visit a famous Roman cen-

turion swept through the Nazarene company. To all of their questions John Mark could only answer, "I do not know where or why. He had a vision, and he was prompted to go."

For three days the household remained in a state of great suspense. Every knock at the door was feared to be news of Simon Peter's arrest, or even worse, his execution. Every visitor was looked at as a possible messenger.

Finally, on the fourth evening, there came a sharp rapping on the outer gate that everyone recognized as Simon Peter's own authoritative signal. From every corner of the house the Nazarenes rushed into the courtyard to greet their leader.

With high good humor he greeted them, and from his manner John Mark could tell that whatever it was that had happened in Caesarea, it had been exciting and wonderful. But Simon Peter was not in the mood to set down his bundle of clothes where he stood and describe his experiences. Reluctantly he put aside the entreaties of his companions, begging time to wash the dust of the journey from his face. At the supper board, he promised, he would tell his story.

At their leader's urging, the Galileans dispersed, each returning to the tasks he had left when Simon Peter had knocked on the door. As for John Mark, filled with curiosity he went silently to his room, where he sat in waiting. A glance from Simon Peter had passed him a message that the fisherman would speak with him alone.

Surely enough, not five minutes passed before there

was a soft knock at the door to his chamber, and Simon Peter entered.

When the door had closed behind his visitor, John Mark said quietly, "You have something important to tell us."

Simon Peter nodded. "Mark, my son, I have learned a great and important matter."

John Mark stood before him, not speaking. He knew that Simon Peter would tell it in his own good time and in his own way.

At last the Galilean seemed to collect his thoughts. "Have you some memorial of the devoted Basilleus?" he asked.

John Mark walked slowly to an alcove of the room and returned with a heavy robe. "This beautiful woven robe I always admired when I was younger," he said. "Basilleus used to laugh and say that he would bequeath it to me when he died. So when he did leave us, I kept it out of sentiment."

"Good," nodded Simon Peter. "It is right that some memorial of Basilleus be in this room when I tell you what has happened."

He fingered the richly embroidered hem of the cloth thoughtfully and continued. "What happened in Joppa and Caesarea was God's way of telling me that the old day is done. Our ancient laws held that no Gentile could be admitted into the worship of God without obeying all of the sacred laws of Israel, and thereby becoming a Jew. No man could eat the meat of swine, for example, and worship God—according to our ancient laws."

John Mark nodded. He had well memorized the hundreds of complex religious laws of his people.

"Basilleus tried to persuade me that it was not God's will to exclude honest, believing Gentiles in this fashion, but my eyes were closed. God waited for those eyes of mine to open of themselves, but they did not. Thus, in Joppa, God spoke to me himself, to show me that I should not call any man common or unclean. In the eyes of God, Jew and Gentile are alike. God is no respecter of persons. When I came to Caesarea, I baptized the centurion, who was a Roman and a Gentile, into the congregation of the followers of Jesus. He was not a Jew, but he is now a Nazarene."

A long silence followed Simon Peter's account of this revelation. John Mark felt a pounding in his heart and a great joy in his spirit to know, finally, that Basilleus had been one of them from the beginning, even if the tightly knit little band of Nazarenes had not admitted him.

"What does this matter mean to us?" asked John Mark, finally.

Simon Peter rose to his feet, a great bear of a man, seeming taller and stronger now than he had ever been. "It means this—you have been wanting to shake the dust of Judea from your feet, to take the story of Jesus out into the world of Greeks and Romans. I think the time has now come for us to make a gospel and trading journey into the world of the Gentiles."

6. THREE AGAINST THE WORLD

IN AN OLD, DRAB HOUSE in the center of the busy city of Antioch a tall, swarthy man in his middle thirties studied his face in a small metal mirror.

He could clearly see the lines around his eyes that had been set there by years of peering across the sun-swept deserts. His rich, black hair was beginning to be streaked with lines of gray—the marks of endless nights of fatigue as the camel caravans lumbered for week after week across the wastes of Arabia. His luxuriant black beard was flecked with gray.

This was John Mark, the trader, fifteen years after his first trading mission down to Joppa in the company of Simon Peter. He was no longer a tender young man of wealth who lived in a rich mansion in Jerusalem. His home now was a Bedouin tent wherever the caravan might rest on its eternal passage up from Egypt into Asia Minor and back again.

In Jerusalem nothing remained for a Nazarene. In the years that had passed, the name of Nazarene had become a cry of hatred for the proper Jews, and those true followers who had the courage of their faith either were dead from persecution or had fled to other cities of the Empire. A very few remained, hidden in

hovels, living like rats. And in John Mark's proud house, where God had put his sign on the first followers on that amazing day of Pentecost many years ago, only empty shadows filled the rooms.

His Uncle Mordecai had died, along with dozens of others, in one of the outrages that had come to plague the Nazarenes. His mother, Miriam, had long since been lowered to her grave.

Of the proud family, only two were now alive—the bronzed, lithe man of middle years who had no more than an hour earlier come in from the desert and his last surviving relative, another uncle, Barnabas.

It was in Barnabas' house in Antioch that John Mark now sat, pondering the passage of years and the aging of his face, and wondering if the years had treated Simon Peter as harshly as they had treated him.

For it had been five years since his last journey to the Holy City and his last visit with the man who had taught him so much—Simon of Galilee, called Simon the Rock.

But he had hastened across the deserts as fast as the fleet camels could carry him, leaving his bulky caravan of Persian silk far behind in the Tigris valley, when the message had reached him: "Simon Peter has fled, at last, from Jerusalem, and would meet you in Antioch."

For nearly an hour John Mark paced the small, dark room, pondering the problems that faced the Nazarenes. Money he had, and plenty of it, as he had always had. It was not a matter of the Nazarenes' starving away from Jerusalem or being unable to settle wherever they wished. It was simply a matter of de-

ciding where the world lay most open to them—east or west. East, in the ancient cities of Asia, or west, in the newer, busier, commercial cities of the Mediterranean countries? That had been the question uppermost in John Mark's mind since that day, two weeks earlier, when the message had come to him by a passing caravan that Simon Peter had fled from the Holy City. And he knew that it was the problem uppermost in Simon Peter's mind.

But it was not the only question that was puzzling John Mark. There was the trip that his Uncle Barnabas wanted him to take with Paul of Tarsus.

Paul was a strange one among the Nazarenes. He had never seen Jesus in the flesh, and he had not joined the faith until a good six years after the Crucifixion. As a matter of fact, he had been a deadly enemy of the Nazarenes for those six years and had even taken part in the tragic stoning of Stephen.

His conversion to the faith had come with blinding suddenness while on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, and once he knew—from his vision of the Risen Lord Jesus—which was the right way to find salvation, he had been the most fiery preacher and evangelist of all, preaching in the synagogues of his native city, Tarsus, and most recently in Antioch. For a small, bent, and often sick man, his sermons and exhortations carried such fire and vigor that he had become a legend throughout the Empire—a legend almost as well known as Simon Peter himself.

John Mark's reverie was broken by a knock at the door.

Snatching it open, he found his uncle, half pulled off

his balance by the sudden swing of the door: "Has he come yet?" John Mark pressed. "Has Simon Peter arrived?"

"A new traveler has come up from Jerusalem," his uncle explained. "He has seen Simon Peter in Caesarea and in Capernaum. Simon is traveling slowly. You should not look for him here in Antioch for a while yet."

"When?" John Mark muttered. "When will he come here?"

Barnabas shrugged his shoulders. "He may remain in Capernaum until the rains of winter set in. Who knows? Now you must come to Cyprus with us."

This sudden change of subject brought John Mark to the problem again—whether or not to go on a projected missionary journey with Barnabas and the strange but fascinating Paul from Tarsus.

"But Simon Peter is the leader of our faith. I must wait until I learn from him what I must do," John Mark protested.

Barnabas was becoming impatient. "Why can't you make your own decision in this matter? We won't be gone forever. A year, a year and a half at the most. To cities you have never seen. Your own Paphos, to start with, and then back to the mainland in the north and up far beyond the Taurus mountains—Pergamum, the other Antioch in the province of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe—all the great cities of the north that you have never seen."

John Mark was wavering. The attraction of the proposed Nazarene missionary tour—the first in the history of their young faith—was all too strong.

"But best of all," his uncle continued, almost craftily, "you can spy out these cities for Simon Peter."

"Spy them out?" asked John Mark, in surprise.

"Yes. Simon is coming to Antioch. He will see that we Nazarenes flourish here, though we have troubles. We must hide, keep out of sight, creep down alleys, hold our services in hidden lofts. Was that the way of Jesus?"

"No, it was not," replied John Mark. "Our faith has always been an open faith, a free faith, and a noble faith. If the Antiochans treat us like this, with scorn, perhaps it would be good to look farther."

Barnabas sighed. "They even have a name of scorn for us here—Christians, they call us."

"Christians?"

"They spit out the word. Instead of calling us by our noble name of Nazarenes, they call us 'followers of the *Christos*,' as they would call a drunkard a 'follower of Bacchus.'"

John Mark had seen too much of the world to let so petty a thing trouble him. He smiled. "Call us what they will," he said, "at least they still recognize us. If they called us nothing and ignored us, that would be something indeed to worry about."

Barnabas smiled in ready agreement. "It all comes to this," he continued, "it is in my mind that this part of the world is no good garden for the flowers of our faith to grow in. The proper Jews disown us and harass us. The Syrians and the followers of eastern faiths scorn us and mock us. Only in the north country, where the Greeks and Romans live, does there seem to be any understanding of the true worth of our mes-

sage. Perhaps for that reason alone you should go into that part of the world, my son, and test out with Paul of Tarsus the soil of new gardens."

John Mark nodded his head slowly. Jesus had told the disciples to take his message out, and make it a light unto the Gentiles. The beacon-lights of the gentile world burned most brightly in Athens and in Rome. The die was cast. He would no longer sit like an empty-headed old woman and wait for Simon Peter. He would go up into the northern world and blaze a new trail for Simon Peter to follow.

"Has Paul chartered the ship that is to take us to Paphos?" he asked.

Barnabas nodded. "It sails tomorrow at noon."

"Good," replied John Mark.

Early the following morning a small company of Nazarenes rode quietly out through the gates of Antioch, bound for the seaport town of Seleucia a few miles away. Paul of Tarsus, that shaggy-browed, wiry, fiery little man, led the way. There was not much talk among the members of this small company as the donkeys hobbled along, for each was buried deep in his own thoughts. They were making the first missionary journey ever to be made by any teachers of the Nazarene belief. Far out of their own haunts they were going, into strange and alien lands, to take a message of a new faith to people who, in many cases, had no faith at all; or if they had any faith, it was the ancient Jewish faith that would not even recognize the new.

"Three against the world," muttered John Mark, as his donkey lurched over the potholes in the road.

By noon they were at Seleucia, and within the hour

their donkeys were unloaded, and they were aboard the swift little grain ship that plied the eastern waters of the Mediterranean. Up from the empty deserts came the tireless east wind, and the craft nosed firmly out into the blue waters of the mighty ocean. By nightfall even the lights of shore were left far behind. As the three men sat under the stars, the troubles they had all encountered in Antioch, in Jerusalem, in Damascus, were washed from their minds.

Three against the world it may be, mused John Mark, but at least it is a new world that will take to new ideas.

He turned to his companions and started to tell them how he felt about this trip into the new world, but he found them strangely silent. Only Barnabas was in any mood to talk, and he was still muttering about the taunts that had been cast after them. "‘Christians! Christians.’ Why do they have to call us that?" he asked, of no one in particular.

But many new ideas were opening up in John Mark’s agile mind. "I rather think it’s a good name," he suggested.

"A good name? What’s good about the taunt of ‘Christian’? Why can’t they call us what we are—Nazarenes?"

"Good uncle," John Mark replied, "where we are going, not one man out of a thousand has ever heard of the town of Nazareth. But all of them know the Greek idea of a *Christos*, a Risen Lord. The Pharisee Jews have put us aside. Let us now put them aside. If we are going into the Greek and Roman world, let us talk and think as Greeks and Romans do. No one of

them would know what a Nazarene is. But all of them will know what a Christian is. Let us be Christians, and proud of it."

A long silence followed, and then it was broken by Paul. "You are right, my young friend. Those of us who never knew Jesus of Nazareth while he lived on earth can not truly be called Nazarenes. But we all know Jesus, the Risen Lord, the *Christos*. That is the only thing we can be—Christians. That must be our name from this day on."

John Mark smiled happily. He felt a rare and priceless meeting of minds in this small company who were setting out—as he had so long dreamed—to take the message to the wider world. He would fare well with them.

He pulled his cloak about his head and slept wearily and well, hoarding strength for the tasks that would start the following morning as they disembarked on the first stage of this exciting new journey on the island of Cyprus, the island of his homeland.

From Salamis, the great seaport of Cyprus, the road curved to Paphos over a long hundred miles of country with hills, valleys, harbors, and inlets where the sharp blue waters of the sea dashed interminably against the ageless rocks. Setting out at a smart pace the moment their ship landed, the Apostle Paul and his companions hoped to make the march to the capital city in three days, stopping now and again for brief visits, but staying in no town longer than an hour.

But John Mark knew better. A seasoned traveler, he knew how the townspeople in the villages they entered would seek them out for news of Jerusalem, of Antioch,

and of all the wider world. Travelers were the only sources of information that these people had, and they welcomed strangers with a fierce and often frightening clamor.

He was right. Before they had gone a mile, they discovered that the fame of the Christian brotherhood had gone before them, and in every hamlet, village, and crossroad there were lonely Jews and curious Gentiles who demanded to know about the new faith—about the new worship of God through the Messiah who had walked the earth of Judea not too many years ago. The fast journey to Paphos became a slow preaching mission.

But finally, by traveling late into the night and avoiding some of the larger towns, the little company managed to enter the gates of Paphos at the week's end—tired, dusty, and worn with the fatigue of the trip.

It was their hope to find lodgings in the home of some Christian friend and to rest quietly for at least a whole day before taking up any preaching in the great city. But they were not to be allowed this rest. As they entered the gates of Paphos, a soldier came forward and stopped them. Bowing low and speaking with great respect, he gave Paul a message from Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor of Cyprus.

Governor Paulus commanded Paul and his companions to present themselves at the palace the minute they should enter the city, for he had heard about the new faith from his soldiers, and now he wanted to hear the story of Jesus from Paul's own lips.

Although tired to the very marrow of their bones,

the small company of missionary travelers were pleased by the command to appear at the palace. This was not Jerusalem, Damascus, or Antioch, where the Christians were held in contempt. This was a Roman city, where the residents were curious to hear the details of the new faith, where new ideas and new visions could take root. As they made their way through the teeming streets of Paphos in the soldier's company, Paul and Barnabas whispered excitedly, telling each other that this command to visit the governor was a sure sign that their missionary trip would be a success.

But John Mark was not so sure. These men he traveled with were good men and true, but they were not seasoned travelers in the Empire. While it was true that the governor was curious and interested, John Mark had no assurance that he would treat the new faith as anything more than a matter of idle curiosity. The old pagan beliefs were too deeply ingrained in the Empire to be rooted out overnight. And there were fraternities of evil charlatans who practiced sorcery in the name of religion and who held the masters of the Empire firmly in their grasp. John Mark had met them on many previous occasions, and he fully expected to meet more of them in Paphos. They clung to the palaces of the Roman rulers like flies to a pot of honey.

He was not mistaken. Governor Sergius Paulus was firmly in the evil control of a member of the fraternity of professional sorcerers—Elymas, the Worker of Wonders.

Elymas was no better or worse than any of the thousands of others who practiced the arts of black

magic in the guise of religion. Instead of any true knowledge of God, they sought only to amaze their followers with tricks and stunts that passed for magic powers among the ignorant. Completely unconcerned with such matters as moral right and wrong, these court magicians concerned themselves only with trying to foretell the future of events and with brewing magic potions from such indelicate ingredients as rats' blood, tigers' claws, oxen hair, goats' tongues, and snakes' tails. These foul ointments were claimed to be able to do everything from guaranteeing a soldier's safety in battle to making a young woman fall in love with a toothless old man.

For these potions and for their services in telling fortunes, these charlatans were paid huge fees by the wealthy. As was to be expected, they would resist with every trick at their command the inroads of a true and honest religion. Elymas was no exception.

When the news came to his ears that a company of Christian preachers had been invited to the palace to instruct the governor, Elymas saw an immediate threat to his own livelihood. If Sergius Paulus should be converted to the new faith, which had nothing to do with trickery of any sort, it would mean the end of his employment as a court magician. Not knowing how the governor would respond to the particular attraction of the message of Jesus of Nazareth, Elymas determined to take no chances.

Working swiftly with the bag of tricks that every professional magician possessed, he arranged the council chambers of the palace for a magical display. Several years earlier he had drilled secret holes through

the walls of the chamber and into the statues of the Greek and Roman gods that adorned the room. Through these holes he stuffed speaking tubes made of reeds, and now, as the presence of the Christian company was announced, he stationed an assistant in back of the curtains to act as a hidden voice.

Next he brought in a pot of an inflammable oil that was colorless. Quickly he painted strange images with this oil on the stone walls so that when they were touched with a burning taper, the writing would flame up, as if sent from heaven. Now all was in readiness.

Elymas stationed himself in his accustomed place behind the governor's chair, and in a moment the governor entered the council chamber, followed by Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark. Seating himself in his chair, the governor commanded Paul to commence his preaching.

Quietly the Christian leader told of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and of his early beginnings. He told how Jesus went into the Temple at the age of twelve to debate with the learned doctors of the Law, and then he began to describe how Jesus grew to manhood and how he gathered the multitudes with him wherever he went. At this point Paul stopped and asked the governor if he understood, now, what Jesus' mission on earth had been.

Sergius Paulus pondered the question. He had been told that the mission of Jesus was to redeem mankind from sin and suffering, but he still did not entirely comprehend. As the governor studied the question, Elymas found the opportunity he had been waiting for.

With a swift motion of his hand, the magician

tapped softly on the wall with his stick. This was the signal for his assistant behind the curtains to speak through the tube into the mouth of the statue of the god Hermes.

"O Sergius Paulus," the deep and sepulchral voice began, "heed not these unbelievers. Only I, Hermes, can save you from fiery death!"

The governor looked up aghast and frightened. But John Mark was not to be fooled. Often before in his travels he had seen magicians of the stripe of Elymas plying their fakery in the bazaars of Egypt, Syria, and Persia. Silencing Paul with a motion of his hand, he pushed against the heavy statue and moved it a foot or so away from the wall. As he did this, the hollow reed came into view and was broken off. Back of the curtains, not knowing what had happened, the assistant continued to speak, but now everyone, including Sergius Paulus, could see that the mysterious voice was coming out of the tube and not out of the statue.

"O Sergius Paulus," the voice continued, "woe unto you if you heed these impostors!"

At the sight of the tube flapping from the hole in the wall, Sergius Paulus began to laugh. He had never quite believed that the statues could actually talk to him, but until now he had never been able to figure out how Elymas had been able to make them answer his questions.

But Elymas was a quick-thinking faker. As soon as he realized that his trick had been discovered, he tapped the stick again. This was the signal for the assistant to light the little pool of inflammable oil that had been allowed to trickle back of the curtains. There

was a *whoosh* and the words WOE TO SERGIUS flamed up the stone wall.

Always before this infernal fire, thought to be a thunderbolt from heaven, had served to frighten the bravest of men. But now, as the flames darted up the bricks, John Mark seized the hem of the curtains and smothered them. As he ripped the curtains down, there could be seen Elymas' assistant shouting into the speaking tube: "Woe to Sergius! Woe to Sergius!"

Elymas backed off in fear. He had been found out in his trickery! Sergius Paulus might even have him beheaded!

But the governor merely laughed while Paul of Tarsus pointed his finger at the cringing magician and warned him: "O thou full of wickedness and mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord!"

Elymas cowered against the wall.

Paul continued, "If thou try this wicked matter again the hand of the Lord will fall upon thee, and thou shalt be blind!"

Blind!

Elymas had heard of the miraculous powers of the Christians, and in his ignorance he thought that they could use these powers for harm as well as good.

In that instant his ingrained fears and deep ignorance overcame him, and he thought, in his panic, that the room was growing darker and that he was already becoming blind!

Screaming and reaching out his hands, he begged his terrified assistant to lead him from the room.

There was a long silence after the cringing magician had left, and in the silence Governor Sergius Paulus began to understand that the great power of the Christian faith was not in magic tricks, but in the force for good that lay inside men's hearts. Together they talked—Sergius Paulus, Paul of Tarsus, Barnabas, and John Mark—until far in the night. Later, much later, the gentile governor of Cyprus asked that he be accepted for baptism as a faithful and believing Christian.

Now, if there had been any regret on John Mark's part for leaving Antioch, it was wiped out. The first missionary journey of the new faith was taking an auspicious start, and the trader from Jerusalem knew that he was truly blazing a new trail for the Nazarenes to follow.

7. CONQUEST OF THE EMPIRE

AFTER A WEEK'S STAY in the capital city of Cyprus, the little company of Christians took ship again, back to the mainland of Asia Minor. Flushed with the success of the first stage of their mission, they passed the hours speaking happily of how swiftly they expected to see the faith spread from town to town, from province to province, and from country to country. Entirely unafraid of the dangers to be encountered, of the tiring distances to be crossed, of the threats to their lives that would soon come to hound them like ravening wolves, Paul of Tarsus sketched out his plans like a general commanding a mighty army.

"We shall stay no more than half a week in the town of Attalia, where we shall land," he proclaimed to his followers as they stood on the deck of the plunging craft, braced against the wind. "While we are in Attalia, we shall find messengers to dispatch to Pergamum and Iconium to inform the citizens of our coming. No longer will we creep into the synagogues and the meeting halls like thieves in the night, hoping by whispers to convert a stray one here and a curious one there. Let us march boldly into the great cities of the Empire and announce the gospel proudly, as we announced it

to Sergius Paulus. It is a greater story than has ever been told on earth, and it will fire the imaginations of all men who hear it. That we know!"

Paul did not use the actual English word *gospel*, as he spoke. Instead, he used the Latin word *evangelium*, which meant "good news," and which later came to be translated into the primitive English of King Arthur's time as *god spel*, meaning the same: good news. All who used the phrase, in any age, spoke of the good news of the coming of Christ.

The idea that the small company of Christians might become a victorious congregation, sweeping through the Roman Empire and wiping out the pagan beliefs and the strange religious cults of the Orient, was a most exciting one. Paul's fire and enthusiasm quickly infected both Barnabas and John Mark.

"A church, and a sign," mused John Mark. "I wonder what the sign of Christians might be."

Then spoke up Barnabas. "In Antioch, where there is already so much popular scorn and criticism of us, a few of our fellows have developed a secret sign that they use when they meet in public and do not want to be jeered at. They make the sign of a fish."

"A fish?" asked John Mark. "Whatever on earth made them select a fish for a sign?"

Barnabas chuckled. "Some of the ignorant among us think that it glorifies the well-beloved Simon Peter, the fisherman from Capernaum. But the sign of the fish actually originated among Christians who had only vaguely heard of Simon Peter. It is used because the first letters of the Greek words for the slogan, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour,' spell the word fish. It has

proven to be a useful sign. If it is a sign you are seeking, it will serve."

And in that fashion they talked eagerly and excitedly as the little ship made the short journey from Cyprus to the seaport of Attalia. Paul's fierce enthusiasm to take the message of Christianity swiftly up and down the length of Asia Minor translated itself into boundless energy. With the help of Barnabas, who was a native of that part of the world, and with what help John Mark could give him from his scanty knowledge of this region, he fashioned a crude map on which he outlined a journey that would take the little company the better part of a year—staying a week in this city, two weeks in that—and that would finally encompass the whole region in a great chain of Christian preaching.

But John Mark was troubled. He was not truly a preacher of the new faith, but only a very intense supporter of the movement. As a member of the close inner circle, he assisted in the ceremonies, baptizing those who came forward after the preaching sessions to proclaim the faith in their own hearts. But he was not a preacher, and he did not fully believe that even the most dramatic preaching journey from town to town would do more than make Christianity a matter of public curiosity.

"I do not know the answer that is in my heart," he confided to Barnabas on the last evening before their ship landed at Attalia. "I am ignorant of these matters. It would seem to me that the best way for us to work would be to stay longer in the various cities—two or three years—planting the roots deep in a few towns,

rather than to plant the roots in shallow ground in many towns."

"I simply do not know the answer," Barnabas admitted.

"Nor I," John Mark agreed. "From what little experience I have had in worldly matters, I would suggest that we make haste slowly in our thinking and planning, and let the best of our plans unfold themselves to us slowly and in their own time."

There was wisdom to this. Barnabas saw it and agreed. But the wisdom did not prevent the friendship of the three men in the little company from suffering a severe trial the following day, shortly after they landed in Attalia.

For on the dockside there waited a messenger from Simon Peter. It was a member of the Jerusalem congregation, who had fled that city with Simon. John Mark recognized him immediately—a man nearly his own age from the town of Capernaum—Joseph of Capernaum, he was called.

At first John Mark feared that Joseph might be seeking him out to bring some bad news from Simon Peter, but Joseph quickly reassured him. Even as they embraced in welcome, Joseph told him, "I bring you Simon Peter's warmest wishes. He is well. He is in Caesarea."

That was comforting to John Mark, who had begun to fear for his beloved friend.

"Simon Peter sent me to Antioch to seek you out," Joseph continued. "I arrived there the day after you had set sail for Cyprus, but friends of Paul told me

you would sail, eventually, for Attalia. I have been here, waiting."

"And Simon?" asked John Mark. "What is he doing in Caesarea?"

"He is waiting and preaching. He is safe in Caesarea from the clutches of the priests, and still he is close enough to Jerusalem to send messages back and forth. And he travels. He has been to Damascus and to Antioch. But now he is back in Caesarea and wants you to come back into Judea when you can."

With the puzzle of the whereabouts of Simon Peter solved to the satisfaction of all of them, the little company sought out lodgings for the night in the busy seaport city. By sundown they were settled in a small but clean home belonging to a local Jewish merchant.

Late into the night the company talked at a fever pitch. Joseph brought them the tragic news from Jerusalem of the growing persecution of the Nazarenes by the Romans and the Temple priests. The Romans were harassing the little band of the faithful, not as an official policy of the Emperor in Rome, but because the growing strength of the Nazarenes was becoming troublesome to the Temple priests. The Romans simply wanted to keep the peace by preventing any show of violence between these two groups within the Jewish faith.

Then John Mark described the journeys he had taken in the last five years and how, everywhere he journeyed, he found the budding roots of the Christian faith. The time would come, he predicted, when a man could travel from one end of the Empire to the other

without passing through a single town where at least one Christian could not be found.

After that, Paul told Joseph about the wonderful experiences they had had in Paphos, on the island of Cyprus. Together they laughed at the discomfiture of Elymas, the professional sorcerer. Joseph, who had encountered men of that stripe on other occasions, roared with laughter as John Mark described the look on his face as the statue was moved away from the wall, and the hollow speaking tube continued to croak the dire warnings that Elymas had arranged for his assistant to give.

Finally, as the oil lamps sputtered low, Paul began to talk more of his plans to arrange their journey through Asia Minor, as a general might arrange a campaign. With his head bowed low, John Mark listened carefully. Not a word did he say as Paul outlined his brilliant and courageous plans.

When he finished, there was a long silence. At last John Mark spoke. "I do not believe it would be wise for us to go on together, Paul," he announced.

"You do not want to be a part of my congregation?"

"We are all a part of that congregation," the young trader replied. "But we must avoid the appearance of marching about like an army."

"Then how else will we capture the enemy and make them prisoners of the faith of love and charity, unless we march like an army, as you call it, into the camp of the Gentiles?"

John Mark looked into the low flames of the oil lamp. "We must never seek to capture them," he said quietly. "We must grow among them like the small

grasses of the field, which grow and grow until the farmer no longer has any thistles, but a field fine for grazing. The Emperor would like nothing better than to see us with signs and banners high over our heads. That would give him a perfect excuse to send his legions among us, to cut us down to nothing. Instead, let us go our various ways, filtering ourselves into all the cities of the Empire until we are to be found inside the very palace of the Emperor, in the hearts of his servants, his officers, and his advisers. Day by day let us each one teach one, and each one again teach one, until the Emperor is the only one left who is not one of us. Let us not be a conquering army, for all to see and protest. Let us be an invisible army that none will see until he hears a Christian talking to him and finds a Christian hand on his arm, urging him to join us."

"Then, if you will not continue with us, where will you go?" Paul asked, after John Mark had finished.

"Back into Judea. Where Simon Peter is, there must I be. He has been my teacher since my youngest days, and I mean to find him and help him, now that he has had to flee Jerusalem."

"Do you intend to remain in Judea, then, all your life? You and Simon Peter and the others of the Jerusalem congregation? Hiding from the Pharisees and the priests?"

"No, the center of our world is Rome, and eventually we must make Rome the center of our faith. Simon Peter wants to remain in Jewish lands, near the heart of Jewry. But I believe that before too long he will see the hopelessness of working in Judea and will see

how much more important Rome is. When that time comes, I will shake the dust of Judea from my feet and move my affairs into Italy."

Paul pondered the idea of Rome. He had never visited the great capital city of the Empire, but it had long been in his mind to make a journey into Italy when the time should be ripe. "I am sorry that you do not stay with us, John Mark," he replied. "But if Rome is to be your goal, it may be that we shall not see each other again until we have crossed the Tiber. It is my goal, too, when I have first taken the faith to the people in the nearer towns and cities."

Both Paul and John Mark understood that the decision to work separately, and not together, was a final one, and one that later circumstances were not likely to change.

For both of them it was farewell, and because of the many dangers besetting them in every corner of the Empire, they both knew that their paths might never again cross.

As if the very elements knew and understood the seriousness of John Mark's decision, the last drop of oil in the lamp was consumed, and the little flame flickered into darkness.

The bustling of their host to find more oil broke up any further talk. The matter was finished.

Silently the four men made their way to the pallets that had been spread for them.

8. THE SEEDS OF DISASTER

ROME! NOT FOR MORE than five years after leaving Paul of Tarsus did John Mark go to Rome, but scarcely a day passed that he did not worry and wonder about the fate of the Christian faith, which was driven out of Jerusalem, which sprang into flower in this city and that city, which had a small congregation even in Rome.

Was Rome, the heart of the great western world, the best city for the new faith to take its permanent roots? Or should the deepest roots of the congregation be planted in one of the cities of Asia or Africa? In Alexandria? Athens? Damascus? Antioch?

John Mark did not know. Nor did Simon Peter. There were too many questions unanswered, too many puzzles unsolved.

But at last Simon Peter consented to journey with John Mark for a visit to the capital city. Their arrival in Rome was not eventful. John Mark had visited the city on several occasions, and they both had a number of friends among the Christian community of that city—travelers who had met them in other cities and who had only recently come to Rome themselves.

This Roman congregation of Christians was drawn

partly from Jews, like John Mark himself, who saw in the story of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth the fulfillment of their age-long hope for the Messiah; and partly from gentile Greeks and Romans who had found the Christian message a welcome escape from the morally crippling obeisance to the pagan gods that was the sum and substance of Roman worship. Such a person was the Roman philosopher Seneca, who visited them one afternoon shortly after their arrival.

The name of Seneca was familiar both to Simon Peter and John Mark, as it was to almost every citizen of consequence in the Empire. A man of great wealth, he was an intimate of the ruling family, and indeed had been assigned to tutor the young emperor, Nero. Now that Nero had been on the throne of the Empire for six years, Seneca was in a position of utmost power, being the young ruler's most trusted confidant and adviser.

But far beyond his importance to the Christians because of his high post in Nero's court was Seneca's fame as an author of plays and as a philosopher. Feared by some for his vast powers, loved by many who had read his philosophic essays, he was respected by all as a wise man and a man of very great righteousness.

He visited the little house where John Mark and Simon Peter lived in utter simplicity—on foot. Accompanied by a single servant, he merely walked up to the door and knocked.

When the ex-slave who served Simon Peter and John Mark as a household helper reported that their visitor was none other than Seneca, the two great Christian leaders looked at each other long and wor-

riedly. In this year of A.D. 60, matters were becoming increasingly difficult for the Christians. As had happened in Jerusalem many years before, their numbers were growing so large in every city of the Empire that they were coming to be feared. So far there had been no direct persecution of the Christians by official order of the Emperor. But fear of a widespread purge hung over the Christian community like a sword suspended by a thread.

"Show the honored Seneca into our room," said John Mark quietly, after the thoughtful silence.

Their household helper opened the door and showed the visitor into their presence. For a measured moment Simon Peter and Seneca looked at one another, like sculptors studying a man for a statue. They were the same age—sixty-four years old. Both were men of large bone and heavy sinew, with great manes of white hair gracing their large, handsome heads. And both stood erect with a splendid grace—the patrician philosopher of the Roman court and the fisherman from Galilee.

"We are honored by your visit, esteemed Seneca," John Mark said, to start the conversation. "Perhaps you will tell us the reason why you have deigned to come to our humble house."

Seneca now turned his studious and piercing gaze upon John Mark. "You are the younger man of this famous pair? You are John Mark?"

John Mark nodded.

"It is strange. I have heard much of John Mark, the trader, born in Paphos of a father of great wealth, and prominent in Jerusalem. I had thought to find a much,

much older man, and a man surrounded by a corps of servants, overseers, and accountants."

Simon Peter smiled. "Our Mark needs no such company. His two hands are all the servants he needs. His own wits are all the overseers and accountants he needs."

Seneca nodded. "Now I shall tell you why I have come here. And I believe that I have already found the answer to the question that I brought."

Simon Peter and John Mark waited.

"The Emperor is a very troubled man," he began. It was true. Whispers scurried constantly about the city of the dreams and strange, dangerous visions that haunted the diseased mind of Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, whose formal name in the state was Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus—Nero Caesar!

"As a lifelong follower of the philosophy of the Stoics, I have tried to teach my young master the powers of self-reliance. I have tried to show him that all power, all life, and all of everything we are and know is nothing more or less than Reason, the divine Word of Reason."

Simon Peter and John Mark nodded. They were familiar with the beautiful though cold and austere Stoic philosophy that held God to be a distant and motionless Knowledge. But the Stoics, in their quiet way, did at least recognize the fullness and the greatness of God. There were even some Greeks in the Christian churches of Asia Minor who tried in their reasoning to prove that Jesus was in reality the presence in human form of this divine Reason, rather than a direct and personal agent of God himself.

"But my young master, the Emperor, does not seem to have the depth of thought to follow my teachings in this way. So he is able to get no help from the philosophy that has helped me all of my life.

"Now here is the thought that I had," Seneca continued, seeming suddenly to be in a hurry to finish. "Because Nero has not the depth of mind that will understand Reason, perhaps he has the human fears and the need of comfort that will welcome a personal Saviour, such as you teach. Perhaps this will rescue and save him from the torments of his own soul."

As Seneca told them of his hopes, their mouths dropped open in amazement. This, from the Emperor's most trusted adviser! The very thought that Nero himself might accept the teachings of Jesus! This was more than any of them had dared hope.

"What is it we should do?" asked Simon Peter, almost trembling with excitement.

Seneca smiled. "I have heard your rabbis tell of the still, small voice of the Lord. That is exactly what I have in mind—to bring a friend into the court who shall be that still, small voice, and to arrange it so that the Emperor will hear him."

"But will the Emperor listen to a Christian evangelist?" asked Simon Peter.

"I believe so. That is the beauty of my plan. I will bring this man into the court as my personal friend. He will not pose as a preacher, but simply as a follower. He should be a man of wealth, a seasoned traveler, who can command the Emperor's respect and interest. I was hoping that somewhere among the Christians such a man could be found."

John Mark pondered the question. "There are many such men among us . . . in Athens, in Corinth, even here in Rome," he began, but the philosopher did not let him finish his statement.

"It is no longer a problem," announced Seneca lightly. "I have already found just such a man."

"Whom have you found among us, Seneca?" asked Simon Peter.

"I have found John Mark," replied Seneca, extending his hand to the amazed young trader, and bowing low in the height of dignified fashion. "Will you come with me, my young friend? We shall dine tonight in the palace, and you shall be seated near the Emperor. There, God and Reason willing, you will have a chance to begin speaking with him in that still, small voice."

Eager for the opportunity of seeing the inside of the magnificent imperial palace and for the possible chance of visiting with the master of the Empire, John Mark strode through the streets alongside his host with his spirits soaring. Seneca had little to say as they made their way through the crowded streets, but as they climbed slowly up the slope of the hill on which the palace was situated, the crowd began to thin out. Shortly they passed through a low arch and entered the palace grounds, where Seneca lived in a secluded apartment. "It was in these very rooms that I used to tutor the boy who is now the Emperor," he explained to John Mark. "Now he has moved into a lavish set of rooms in the main building, and he has turned over all of these rooms to me. They connect with the main wing of the palace through an underground passage."

Through this tunnel they passed, and within a few

minutes they were ushered into the great banquet room. Already, as early as they were, the huge chamber was filled with the chatter of dozens of men and women—senators and generals, dancing girls and the slaves who attended them, soldiers and musicians—all of them laughing and shouting for attention in the bedlam.

With most of the guests gone to their own seats, Seneca and John Mark slipped quietly into the places that had been set for them. As was customary, Seneca was given a seat close to Nero, where he could whisper directly into the Emperor's ear. Seneca had explained this strange habit of Nero's. So much did he prize himself on a quick wit and a ready tongue—which he did not possess—that he made his tutor stay next to him at every court function to whisper into his ears the answers to any questions that might come his way. John Mark smiled as he watched the old philosopher whisper witty remarks from time to time to the Emperor, and then heard, immediately after, those very remarks called out to the diners in the Emperor's own shrill and tinny voice, to the great laughter and applause of the multitude. The smiles that wiped across Nero's face when his forged jokes received these ovations were tense and frightened.

"What is he afraid of?" asked John Mark in a whisper, his mouth close to Seneca's ear.

Seneca toyed with a sprig of spice and leaned close to John Mark, hesitant lest he miss a question from his master. "Afraid? He is afraid of life, of people. But most of all he is afraid of himself."

"But what of his own religion? I have heard that

Nero has a whole company of priests who follow him night and day."

"He has. He has a company of priests who foretell the future, who look into the past, and who interpret his dreams for him. And he has the statues of his gods. The pagan gods that the ancients used to worship. Jupiter, Venus, Mercury. He spends hours talking to them."

"But how can they answer him?"

"The statues don't. The priests do. The priests are present with the statues, answering his questions, telling him how powerful he is, how strong."

John Mark sat silently while Seneca leaned suddenly in the other direction to whisper a witty remark to Nero. One of the dancers had blown him a kiss. Over the laughter of the crowd John Mark could hear the Emperor's high scream as he repeated what Seneca had whispered to him, and from the crowd there rose a wave of laughter.

For a moment Nero smiled. But the fear never left his eyes.

Seneca leaned back in John Mark's direction. "For months I have been trying to teach him self-reliance, and the true knowledge that would drive away that fear. But he has not the power nor the intellect for knowledge. Now, if we can draw you into the conversation, perhaps you can find what so many other people have found in your faith—strength based on the knowledge that men are immortal. That men need not die. That God sent his Son to earth to bring men everlasting life."

"If he will let me, I will tell him."

"It is the only thing that will save his reason," Seneca replied. "And if we do not save his reason, we will not save Rome."

John Mark looked puzzled.

Seneca continued. "The real danger is this. If Nero loses his reason, he will come to fear everything. The trees around him. The servants who wait on him. The tutor who taught him. The very buildings that shelter him. And what Nero fears, Nero will destroy. It is not Nero that I am trying to save. It is the people and the city around him."

At that moment there was a muffled curse near him, and John Mark saw, out of the corner of his eye, that one of Nero's slaves had stumbled and had spilled a glass of wine on the Emperor's shoulder.

Instantly the room was in an uproar. Shrilling his voice in anger, the Emperor struggled to his feet, screaming at the slave and striking at him with his pudgy hands.

Five guards dashed forward from their obscure posts in the shadows. With a single motion they pinioned the slave's arms to his side. As John Mark watched, an icicle of terror shot into his heart. He looked squarely into the slave's face. The slave did not recognize him, but he recognized the slave. For several nights, recently, that silent face had been present among the company that gathered in the cavern near the wheat warehouse where the Christians held their evening worship. Just one of the hundreds he was, and a nameless one at that, but he was a secret Christian.

"He tried to poison me," screamed Nero. "He tried to drown me. He tried to kill me. Slash off his ear!"

As Nero's voice rose, so did his courage. It was his custom to frighten his servants into abject fainting spells by having the tips of their ears cut off when some mishap occurred. Groveling at his feet, begging for forgiveness, they gave him the sense of power he demanded.

"Slash off his ear!" he demanded.

There was a flash of silver, as one of the guards raised his gleaming sword high over his head, and in the flash the slave winced. But he did not cry out. In horror John Mark saw that fully half the slave's ear had been cut off by the swift blow of the razor-sharp sword. Blood spurted out of the wound like a red arrow.

Nero waited in triumph. Not a sound was to be heard in the room. This was the moment, usually, when the offending and miserable servant slumped to his knees to beg forgiveness. This was the moment when Nero showed his power to the world—the power of life and death over humans. It was at this moment that the crowds always gave him their greatest adulation.

But something was different. Although blood was drenching his shoulder from the wound, the slave moved not a muscle. Straight and erect he stood, looking the Emperor calmly in the eyes.

For a long moment Nero stared at the slave, scarcely believing what he saw. And then, as he became aware of the stunned silence in the room, he looked wildly about. All of the guests at the banquet were on their feet, watching. None of them were smiling. All of them were waiting—waiting to see what Nero would do.

Quickly shouldering the guards aside, one of Nero's generals hustled up to the slave, as if to teach him his

role. Whispering hoarsely, he asked: "Have you no fear, you miserable wretch?"

Raising his hand slowly to his bleeding ear, the slave shook his head, not at the stunned Nero, but at the general. "Fear? What is there to fear? The Emperor can kill me, if that is his wish, for he is the Emperor. Or he can set me free for my misdeed, which was an accident. But why should I have fear of either life or death? I am a Christian. I fear no man. I fear only the wrath of the Lord."

He did not speak in any ringing tones, for he was not trying to make a speech. He spoke simply, to answer the question that was put to him. Scarcely any of the guests heard his answer—that he was a Christian.

But Nero heard. His puffy, red face went sallow. Never before had any living creature stood up to him without fear!

Now did Nero know a fear greater than any he had ever faced. This was the unknown! This faith and courage was the dread unknown that neither his priests nor his fortunetellers could pierce.

Finally the wells of fear and anger overflowed in Nero's heart, and he began screaming and beating the slave in the face with his almost useless fists. "Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!" he shouted to the guards. "He has no fear of his Emperor. He treats his Emperor like a mere mortal. He has no fear! Kill him!"

Bowing his head to the inevitable, the slave was dragged away to execution by the guards. Like a statue Nero stood, staring after him, and then suddenly, remembering that the room was filled with guests who were

watching him, he ran headlong from the chamber, screaming for his priests to follow him.

In the bustle of the crowd, Seneca tugged at John Mark's sleeve and led him by a rear door from the banquet chamber. Down through empty passages they walked, until the noise from the great room was diminished to silence.

"Did he know that he had Christians among his household?" asked John Mark finally, when they had reached the palace garden.

"I do not believe so. He has never met a Christian before tonight. Now it is too late for a Christian to talk to him like a human being, for now he fears them. I had hoped that he could meet you and learn what faith is without fear. But he learned only what fear is, without faith."

They crossed a patch of lawn. "I must hasten you back to your house, John Mark, and I am afraid that we must never meet again. It will now be too dangerous."

"You think he may now come to persecute the Christians in Rome?"

"If not tomorrow, then the day after. Now that he has learned that Christians fear no man, not even the Emperor, the die is cast. He can only rest secure by destroying you."

"But there are hundreds, thousands of us, Seneca. Surely he won't try to wipe out the whole of our faith?"

"He will try," replied the philosopher, "but perhaps that will make you all the stronger."

"That is why we are in Rome," John Mark explained. "The priests of the Temple drove us out of Jerusalem."

"And now, if they drive you from Rome, you will flee

into all the world," observed Seneca. And then quietly he continued: "I have heard about the miracles of your faith, about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth on the third day. That is not the real miracle of your Christian faith."

"Then what is the true miracle?" asked the younger man.

"The real miracle is that every time one of you is cut down, two spring up. Life means nothing to you, only that dream you have of the kingdom of heaven. Truly, John Mark, so long as you have faith instead of fear, there is nothing on earth, no force of arms, no power of wealth, no endlessness of time, that can stop the Christian faith from growing. That is the greatest miracle of all—the faith in your hearts."

They had come now to a small gate in the rear wall of the palace grounds. Quietly Seneca placed his arms on John Mark's shoulders. "Leave now," he said, "and we shall never again meet, except by the merest chance."

9. FIRE AND FLAME

THE STRANGE AND TERRIFYING EVENTS of his visit to the court of Emperor Nero were to haunt John Mark for many years.

For months before that occasion there had been whispers through the capital city that the master of the Roman world was mad, but no one could say specifically what he had done that would mark him insane. And on that night his actions seemed no different than usual, and to most people they did not indicate anything out of the ordinary.

It was nonetheless true that from that hour a pall of fear began to hang over the city. Trade and commerce, usually so bursting and exuberant, began to be spotty and erratic. The number of suicides among the more prominent citizens slowly increased. The great Roman army became more and more restless.

It is not right to say that no one knew what the evil trouble was. John Mark knew. He was no philosopher, hidden in a library behind the books of the ancients. He was an active trader, whose journeys took him endlessly up and down the highroads of the Empire. He was as active in affairs as any man of wealth in the city, and he knew what the matter was.

He had seen it in Nero's eyes. Nero had heard about

the Christians who had been slowly growing in numbers in the principal cities of the Empire. He had laughed at the jokes that people made about them. He knew vaguely that they worshiped a man who had been the Son of God and who had proclaimed his divinity through the Resurrection.

But he had not taken them too seriously. He had seen strange religious cults come and go among his people, and indeed he had dabbled in some of them, as curious men are wont to do. But until that very night he had never knowingly stood face to face with a Christian and felt fear in his heart in the presence of a greater faith than he himself could ever understand.

For the first time in his life, Nero had realized that Rome, and the ancient pagan religions of the Romans, would fall under the power of this new faith. The fear in Nero's eyes was the fear that any man might know who suddenly saw death, face to face.

John Mark knew this.

He knew it, but it did not make him exultant. It gave him no sense of pride or of power. For he knew that the days were shortly to come that the Jewish prophets had long ago proclaimed—when righteousness and evil would contend on the face of the earth for the souls of men. It would be a time of bloodshed, of disaster and chaos. It would mean suffering and death for Christians, as Jesus had known suffering and death.

He knew and Nero knew that there was no longer room on the earth for both Christ and anti-Christ. The terrible struggle had started that night in the banquet hall, but when it would end, and where it would lead, no man knew.

"Must we set out watchmen when we go to pray?" Simon Peter asked in one of their long talks about the bleak promises of the future.

"No, there is no need to set out watchmen," was John Mark's studied reply. "This matter is larger than any battle with the Gauls, and even the mad Nero knows that. He will not try to crush out our company by a raid in the night. We are safe from mere forays and stealthy encounters."

"Then what must we do?" asked Simon Peter, hoping against hope that some answer would show itself, some answer that would prevent fighting and death.

"We can only mind our own affairs and bring more people into our company. Even now Nero knows that we are more in numbers than his armies. That alone would not keep him from attacking us, and even today, if the order came from him to wipe out every Christian in the Empire, it could be done. But every day that passes gives us more hope."

"Hope? Hope that there will be no battle? No fighting?"

"No," replied John Mark in sorrow. "I know in my heart that we must walk through the valley of the shadow before we enter into the kingdom. Our only hope is that by the time Nero does decide to destroy us, we will be too big ever to be destroyed by the hand of man. That is our hope, my beloved friend—to have a congregation that is one man larger than the largest army that any emperor or prince can put before us."

"I . . . I do not understand," Simon Peter replied.

"In the prophecies of our fathers, written by Daniel, it is told how the armies will fight in the latter days.

We know we can not escape that battle. What we must make sure of is that no matter how many of us die, at least one will live—to preserve the gospel and carry it into the next generation. We must be like the thorn of the fields. Cut it down, and so long as one slip remains, the next season it will grow twice as large. Burn it with fire, and so long as one seed remains, it will root again and grow. That Christian seed must remain, no matter if it is but a small child, hidden in some far corner of the city. That seed must remain.”

And so the talks continued, endlessly, as the leaders of the Christians tried to take the measure of events and plan. Not plan how to escape the holocaust that each knew was awaiting, but plan how one seed would remain alive into the next generation.

Thus slowly the months passed. The year 60 came and went, and 61. In and out of Rome John Mark traveled, seeing to the spread of his commercial ventures and carrying the word of the growth of the Christian faith down to Antioch, across the great sea to Alexandria, past Damascus into Persia, even to the western gates of the world, to distant Spain.

Sometimes Simon Peter accompanied him to preach to the newer and the distant congregations, but more and more often, as the months rolled into the years, he remained with the congregation at Rome. He was an old man, and the end seemed ever nearer.

The year 62 came and went, and the year 63. Paul of Tarsus, accompanied by the Greek physician Luke, had come to Rome a political prisoner, accused by the Pharisees of the Jerusalem Temple of being a religious agitator. But his case had been dismissed, and now he

remained in Rome, planning, ever planning more trips into the outer reaches of the Empire—into Gaul, into the island of Britain.

Then came the year 64, and July of that year. Never had the terror and fear so oppressed the citizens of Rome, never had the sense of destiny hung so heavily over the Christians. Even those who had joined the faith out of mere curiosity found a magnetism in the times that compelled them to believe ever more deeply. Night after night, as the Christians met in their caverns under the great city, the corridors were packed with eager and fervent young men and women who fought off the oppression of the tottering Empire and its pagan faith by reaching up to grasp the bright hopes of the faith that Simon Peter preached.

How did it start, the great fire of Rome?

Nero could not answer, nor could the army, nor the generals, nor even the priests of the pagan temples or the fortunetellers.

As if the tired heart of ancient Rome had burst from the very weight of its evil, the fire seemed to break out in every quarter of the city at once. For generations the citizens had been building flimsy wooden buildings, one upon the other, roof upon roof, wall to wall; and now, in a roar of flame that might have come from the mouth of hell itself, the fire swept down upon the crumbling slums, licking into every corner and devouring every shanty from the fetid banks of the Tiber to the heights of the seven hills.

Like terrified beasts, the citizens swarmed out of Rome by every road and every path. Hundreds were burned in their hovels, but more hundreds were trampled under

the hooves of the frantic chariot horses, bearing the nobles and their families to safety.

But the Christians did not seek to leave.

The tragedy of the fire drew them to the great cavern under the wheat warehouse, where thousands of them could gather. From a platform high above them all, Simon Peter cried out to them in his great voice, after these many years still heavy with the accents of Galilee: "Have faith, for all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides forever!"

Like the roar of a heavy sea against the granite rocks of the seacoast, the congregation of thousands murmured his words after him, to grave them in their hearts.

They did not know what the morning would bring. They only knew that where Simon Peter was, there must they be.

In a distant part of the city another man murmured to himself. "None shall escape. None shall escape. The army, who would behead me, is fleeing. The senators, who would betray me, are fleeing. The Christians, who would not fear me, are hiding from the flames. But none shall escape. The flames shall devour them all, and of all of them, only one shall escape. Only Nero will live through the fire and build a new Rome on the ashes of the old."

It was Nero himself, standing on the high balcony of his palace, watching the flames level the capital city of his empire.

As he watched, his fevered mind leading him insanely on, he was suddenly caught with a vast idea. "The

Christians! The Christians!" He turned to his guards and shouted an order to them:

"Let the Christians be given the blame for this. It will show them that there is something they must fear. They will fear fire, and they will fear the blame of centuries. Order out the troops to stop all Christians where they seek to flee the city, and throw them into the flames. When the senators and the generals return, they will find a new Rome without any Christians in it, and Nero the sole master of all!"

Dancing with a maniacal glee, he screamed his orders over and over again as the soldiers buckled on their arms. Anything seemed better to them than staying in the palace, wondering when Nero might even blame them for the fire.

One of them, a young man from far in the north of Gaul, fair-haired and a staunch worshiper of gods of the woods and streams, saluted his emperor, and announced: "I know where the Christians gather, Divine Nero. There is a woman who left me for their meetings. In a cavern under the great wheat warehouse by the eighth bridge of the Tiber."

"Excellent, excellent," the insane figure in the purple and gold toga shrilled, clapping the soldier on the back and hugging him wildly in his arms. "I appoint you a centurion to lead the charge."

Clutching the hem of his toga from around his feet, Nero led the way himself, hustling the company of grim-faced guards off the terrace and pointing toward the plaza before the palace. "The Christians! The Christians!" he screamed after them, as they clumped away in the red glow. Half a thousand paces away from the

palace, the guards could still hear the screams of their emperor, urging them on to the kill.

Nero's screams were sharp in the ears of another man of the palace company as he hurriedly passed through a hidden rear gate out of the palace grounds. By a straight and almost empty route, he stumbled over the cobblestones toward the wheat warehouse. It was Seneca, who had watched Nero in the shadows and who now had made up his mind what he must do.

Inside the warehouse, fully ten minutes ahead of the slowly marching company of soldiers, the white-thatched philosopher made his way swiftly to the entrance to the caverns below. Down the steep steps cut into the limestone he made his way, looking backward at each step in fear of the soldiers.

As he came out into the caverns, his eyes at first had trouble in finding the one he sought among the thousands who packed the great cavern like a flight of birds in a sheltering tree. But shortly his eye picked out Simon Peter high on the rock where he stood, and beside Simon Peter, the tall, straight figure of John Mark.

Pushing his way through the crowd, he made his way to the aged patriarch, and reaching through the crowd, plucked at his sleeve.

In whispered urgency he told Simon Peter and John Mark what had happened. Nero, in his madness, had turned the troops loose on the Christians, to place on them the blame for the fire!

Simon Peter's great shoulders sagged in sorrow. He had known it would be something like this—not any battle with plans and strategy and tactics, but a blow out of the darkness, with no escape.

Hastily calling three or four of the strongest and most fearless of the Roman Christians to his side, he outlined the matter to them and sent them into the crowd, to start passing the word for all to leave immediately by the damp, narrow holes that emptied out of the cavern in every direction. Some of these serpentine passages led outside the city; others only into the black waters of the Tiber. As he gave his orders, Simon Peter knew that he was consigning most of his congregation to death.

But there was no other way. If only one of them could escape, one would be enough.

The young leaders made their way into the whispering multitude, and Simon Peter turned back to Seneca. But there was no time for thanks. Quickly Seneca spoke: "I am still of the Emperor's household and have authority. Two of us, or even three, I can save, through a private way I know. Even the most bloodthirsty of soldiers will not challenge me yet, though by dawn tomorrow my young master may decide that I, Seneca, fired the city. Simon Peter, John Mark, come with me."

For a long moment Simon Peter watched the crush of people making their way out of the cavern, and then he turned to Seneca. Tears welled in his eyes. "No, I cannot leave. I must stay with them, to keep faith with them. On the Word alone that I brought them from the hill of Golgotha in Jerusalem, they joined the company of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Now I must go to my death with them, to show them the way of Christians."

Seneca could not argue with the Christian leader. He knew the demands of leadership and the fortitude of

faith. "Faith prevails, where Reason falters," he said, quietly.

But Simon Peter had one thing more to say. Placing his hand on John Mark's shoulder, he told Seneca: "This young man, he must not perish. Take him with you, and hide him safely."

John Mark shook his head. "No, beloved Simon Peter, I have too long been with you to leave you now. If this be the end of our many journeys, then it will be the end. Let us only pray that a seed will remain."

Simon Peter placed his fingers on John Mark's lips. "There is no time even for farewells, and there is certainly no time for talk and argument. You must be that seed. You are still young, and with the help of this friend, you can escape Rome. You were with us in the Garden of Gethsemane. You were with us in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Only you, and you alone, know the whole, full story of the coming of Jesus, the Son of God, to earth. That story must not perish. It must abide for all time. Not on the lips of men, as in the past, but indelibly on parchment, that it may be read in every province of the Empire for generations to come.

"Only you can give those tidings to the world, to give faith and courage to those who follow us and who will be persecuted in days to come."

John Mark knew that there was no time for debate and argument, nor was there any argument that could be made. All of his life he had followed the wishes of Simon Peter, and even though now it meant leaving his beloved leader to the flames of Rome, he could do nothing but obey.

Clasping the fisherman in his arms, he wept upon his

shoulder. But he obeyed. In the far reaches of the cavern a scream was heard, followed by another and another and another.

The soldiers had arrived!

Without a backward glance, John Mark turned and followed the Roman, Seneca, up the secret passage to the flames outside. Many miles over many years had he come in the service of the faith, and through many dangers. Now, his last and most dangerous journey lay before him—out of Rome.

He knew that he must not fail.

10. JOURNEY'S END

THE LITTLE TOWN OF TRES TABERNAE lay some forty miles from Rome down the highroad to the great seaport of Puteoli.

It was a shabby town, inhabited for the most part by crafty peasants who gave more attention to robbing the grain caravans that plied the road to serve Rome with wheat than with raising wheat, or anything else, of their own.

But it was a busy town. It was here that merchants and traders came down from the capital to meet the incoming shipments of goods and to haggle bitterly over prices and possible bounties. And it was here, often, that the traders out of Asia Minor and Egypt preferred to sell their goods and save the high cost of finding warehouses for their consignments, lodgings for their roustabouts, and food for themselves in the great city.

It was a town of stinks and of mires, of bloodshed and thievery, of mud and dirt.

But like every town or city in Italy, and indeed in the Empire, it had its gathering place for Christians—a dirty inn on a back street.

Now, late one night, in a driving rain, two horsemen made their way into Tres Tabernae from the seacoast, and by a devious route, circled the heart of the town

and stopped cautiously at the inn. They were John Mark and a companion.

After a whispered consultation with a servant, the horses were whisked out of sight into the stables, and the travelers entered the building. Not a word was spoken in the smoky great chamber, filled as it was with tired, hungry men and women seeking shelter from the storm. If one had watched very carefully, he would have realized that it was not necessary for these travelers to make themselves known to the keeper of the inn.

Looking up at them as they entered, he nodded briefly, and without a backward glance, led them through the scullery, where they disappeared behind the hogsheads of wine that were kept for the customers.

Behind the hogsheads a short passageway led down a flight of stairs and into an inner room.

The two travelers marched along in the darkness, completely familiar with the hidden passage. Without so much as knocking, they unlocked a door at the end and entered a small room, well lighted with candles, and warm. Throwing off their heavy robes, which had protected them from the weather on their long journey, they threw themselves into comfortable chairs with great sighs of weariness. Since long before dawn they had been on the way, and now, at last, they could rest.

"I remember the first trading mission that I ever took," John Mark mused, as he relaxed. "I was nervous and afraid, and expected my whole mission to fall into disaster. But that feeling would not half describe the worries and fears that plague us these days as we smuggle supplies, food, and money from Asia to our brethren in Rome."

His companion laughed. He was a much younger man, a Christian from Alexandria whom John Mark had taken to travel with him and to help with the details of the secret missions he now made. Flavius Aquila his name was, and the horrors of the Roman persecution were but legends to him. He had never been in Rome. He had never been persecuted for his faith. He was scarcely more than a boy, but a helper of inestimable assistance to John Mark in these later days.

For a while they rested, and then, as the strength returned to their limbs, John Mark began to make his plans.

"The first wagons of grain will pass through here tomorrow for Rome," he said. "We will have messages off to our brethren in the morning, telling them where to gather to receive the goods."

Aquila nodded and bent his head to work at sharpening the quill that he used for writing. One of the reasons why John Mark had been attracted to hire this young man in the first place had been his great facility at writing and keeping accounts.

"A message to the presbyter Flaccus, telling him to whisper the word among our Christian brothers that a cargo of supplies is on the road. They can expect a distribution to the needy within three days."

Aquila nodded and made brief notes on parchment.

As the young man busied himself with his writing, John Mark rose, and from the folds of his tunic took out a tube of lead, as thick as his wrist and as long as his forearm. Unsealing the top, he peered anxiously at the contents, and then, satisfied, closed and sealed it again.

Drumming it absently in the palm of his hand, he seemed to dream as the moments passed and Aquila continued undisturbed at his task.

At last the young man finished and looked up. John Mark woke from his reverie and shifted forward. "Now, my young friend, here is one message I must give you word for word, for even you, with your very quick wits, would not know how to phrase this one."

Aquila smiled, his teeth flashing in the candlelight. "Tell me the words. I can put them down as fast as you can recite them."

It was true, and John Mark smiled affectionately at him.

"This message," he announced, "must go by our most trusted of all couriers. I believe none other than the innkeeper himself can be trusted to deliver it. As soon as you have written the message, let us speak with him and have him on his way by dawn. What he delivers is more precious than all the cargoes of wheat, than all the sacks of silver coin, than all the supplies of food and clothing that I have ever delivered to Rome."

A frown spread slowly across Aquila's face. His companion had confided in him every secret of the congregation of Roman Christians whom he served, but he had made no mention of a secret so important as this.

"The message is to well-beloved Linus, the keeper of the Roman flock of Christians," he said. "Affectionate and dear brother in Christ—in this sealed tube is a message that I have spent my life preparing. Greater than all the wealth I have helped bring, of more import than the journeys I have made to the Christians in other lands, of more worth than even my life."

Impressed to the heart by the force of John Mark's words, Aquila wrote with strong and deliberate strokes on the parchment.

John Mark continued: "But these are new times, and this is a new world. What I give you in this tube of lead can last through all the ages; it can live even though the voice of every Christian man is stilled. It is a small thing. But it is the most important thing. It is the seed of our great faith, which will send roots down into the ground and flower after us, for generation unto generation."

Aquila continued his writing, and when he saw that John Mark had finished, he sat back and asked, "A seed? In that tube of lead?"

John Mark nodded. "A seed. A seed of our faith."

It was in Aquila's mind to ask the normal question of any curious young man—to be allowed to gaze on this important treasure. But a noise interrupted the quiet work of the two men.

Instantly John Mark was on his feet. His well-developed sixth sense, which had steered him safely from all danger through his life, warned him that the knock on the door was no mere pleasantry on the part of the keeper of the inn. It was a warning!

Pulling the door open, John Mark found the inn-keeper trembling with terror.

"They have been waiting for you to arrive. Now the inn is surrounded!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Who?"

"A company of soldiers. Someone has betrayed you. Your life is forfeit on the Emperor's orders. They know that you have been the one who has been keeping the

Christians in Rome alive with smuggled supplies, and now they know you by sight. Out the rear door, and you can escape. There are horses there now. You must leave Italy and never return!"

Overhead John Mark could hear the ominous guttural curses of the soldiers, as they turned over chairs and tables, searching for the man they had seen enter the inn. They knew him by sight!

"Now go," the innkeeper commanded, pulling the door shut. "I can hold them off no more than a moment. And don't go to Rome. There are new guards on all the bridges. Your name is known, and your face!"

The door slammed closed!

As swiftly as trained gladiators, John Mark and Aquila pulled their robes over their heads, and, blowing out the candles, pushed through a hidden rear entrance.

Along a narrow passage they crawled, and over bales and boxes in the stable; then, finally, through a short tunnel that led them under the wall of the innyard and up through a clump of bushes into the open.

The rain poured down, and the night was so black that the two men could not see each other as they whispered a farewell.

"Aquila," John Mark commanded, "you must be the messenger. They do not know you in Rome. You are the only one who can get through the guards."

"I will go. I will be safe," Aquila answered, clutching John Mark's arm and letting him know by a sharp clasp that he could be trusted.

"Forget all the other messages. If the food and supplies do get through, the Christians will find them well

enough. Do only this one thing. Take this to Linus, the leader of the Christians of Rome."

In the darkness he thrust the tube of lead into Aquila's hands. "Guard it with your very life, for it is the seed of our faith in the future."

"I will," Aquila promised.

Not a moment too soon the men parted, finding the horses that had been hidden in the brambles. Quietly leading their mounts back into the forest, John Mark and Aquila took separate ways, John Mark to circle the town and return to shipboard in Puteoli, where he could escape Nero's reach; Aquila, in the role of an innocent visitor from Egypt, on the road to Rome.

Five nights later Aquila sat in a tavern by the river Tiber, deep in the heart of the great city of the Empire. For three days he had wandered about Rome like any well-to-do tourist, asking foolish questions and gaping at the new buildings that were slowly being built on the ashes of the great fire.

But at night he wandered in the slums and the hidden sections of the city, where the Christians might be found. And each night he wandered from inn to inn, for he knew that somewhere in the city would be the one tavern where contact could be established with Linus, the leader of the Christian congregation.

By the end of the third day he realized that he was under surveillance, as he began to notice the same two or three unobtrusive men following him from house to house in his search. He was satisfied that they were not agents of the Emperor, for they were cunning and subtle and completely unobtrusive. If they had been

Nero's agents, they would simply have faced him and demanded that he prove his innocence.

No, he knew that it was only a matter of time now until they would complete their surveillance, trust him, and lead him to Linus.

At last the hour came.

A beggar stopped him on the street, asking alms. At first Aquila paid no attention to him, for Rome was filled with legions of beggars. But this one seemed to be blocking his path unnecessarily, even though he tossed him a copper.

He paused and looked at the beggar. Here was no sick and crippled mendicant. Underneath the tattered and dirty cloth that shielded his face there shone eyes of the deepest wisdom and strength.

Aquila backed slowly into a shadow of a building.

"You wish to see a certain leader," the beggar announced in a soft voice.

"I do," Aquila replied. "I come to find Linus, with a message of the greatest importance for him."

The beggar studied him again, without replying. Then, slowly, he asked: "From whom do you bring a message?"

"John Mark."

The beggar looked at him, and without raising his voice, began to test him with questions.

"Where was John Mark born?"

"Paphos."

"And where did he live when a boy?"

"Jerusalem, the Holy City."

"And whom did he serve, while yet a boy?"

"Jesus the Saviour."

"And who was his constant companion for many years?"

"Simon Peter."

The questions seemed to satisfy the beggar, for he loosened the cloth from his face and smiled. "I am Linus," he announced, taking Aquila's arm and leading him down a short alley and into a house that was all but hidden from sight by the ruined, fallen and burned timbers of what had once been a great trading mart.

Inside the house candles were burning, and although the room itself showed the signs of the great fire, it had been cleaned and was comfortable. "Now tell me, what is the message you have brought?" Linus commanded, in a friendly, warm voice.

From the inward folds of his cloak Aquila brought out the parchment that he had inscribed at John Mark's dictation. Slowly Linus read it, and then set it aside. "Now," he asked, "this strange thing of great value that John Mark mentions. What can it be?"

Aquila handed him the tube of lead. Without a word Linus unsealed the top and with deft fingers reached in and drew out a roll of parchment. Slowly, patiently, he unrolled the parchment. Then he stared at it for a long time.

"John Mark told me that it was the seed of our faith," said Aquila.

"It is. It is that one thing that has been missing from our treasure. It is the written record, for all the ages to cherish and keep. It is the guarantee that though all of us shall perish, the news of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth shall live forever."

"The news?"

"It is written, in John Mark's own hand," Linus replied. Then, quietly, he began to read the first words of the story that John Mark had set down on parchment, that its message might never be lost: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'"

Then he stopped and looked at Aquila.

"You could have come from the ends of the earth," he said, "but you could not have made a more important journey than this one that brings you here. Our brethren in Rome are hungering for the message of Jesus, and now that we are being torn asunder, our hopes ever to hear from the lips of a witness the story of the Saviour have faded.

"But here it is. For the first time in my life I am holding it in my two hands, and it shall never be lost—the story of Jesus of Nazareth! Written for the ages in the words of a living witness.

"The gospel according to Mark."

EPILOGUE

THE SCROLL that John Mark gave to the Christians at Rome in about the year A.D. 70 changed the history of the world.

Before that time the story of Jesus of Nazareth was known only by word of mouth, and was passed from city to city in pieces and fragments. Some congregations knew some of the facts of Christ's life; others knew different facts. There was no single written account of the life of the Saviour to which men could turn for the final answer to so many of the questions that have always haunted mankind.

Until the time of John Mark the ancient tradition of the rabbis had been binding: Commit nothing to writing! Not even the story of the coming of the Messiah was written down.

But John Mark realized that he was living in a different and a new age. The faith in the coming of the Messiah and the kingdom of God, which had for centuries been shared only by the Hebrews, was now ready to be taken out to the world—to the Greeks, the Romans, the Gauls, the Egyptians, the Medes, the Persians, in fact, to every nation. No longer could the tradition of the rabbis hold force, John Mark realized, for the world was far too large for the story of Jesus to encompass it

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